

Halo

by LordHelix

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Summary: A retelling of the creation of the SPARTAN-IIIs and humanity's initial struggle against the Covenant Empire. Closely canonical, but with some new elements added. Envisioned as a movie plot. I am not affiliated with Bungie, 343 Industries or Microsoft; Halo belongs to them. Please take the time to review, it would be greatly appreciated!

1. It all goes downhill from here

I love the Halo universe. It has a spectacular story that is complemented by incredible novels. But I find that it has one thing lacking: a movie, or two, or more, even, based around the story told in the games and books. This particular fanfic, along with its sequels, is my attempt to reconcile that fact. It won't be portrayed in a script format, but it is one possible way that a movie based on Halo could be like. I am in no way affiliated with Bungie, 343i or Microsoft, so this is just one version of events that is my own, not theirs. I will attempt to stick as close to their canon as possible, but certain liberties will be taken in order to fix some canonical errors or for the sake of better storytelling. I hope you have as much fun reading this story as I had writing it. Thank you, and enjoy!

February 22, 2511

Theryn Desert, Mamore

The night was a calm one, with a cloudless sky that let the sole moon of Mamore, Emoris, shine to its absolute fullest, setting the otherwise bleak desert awash in a pale radiance. It was also a quiet night, with an absence of wind. The only sound to break the stillness of the picturesque desert scene was the drone of the engines of three D77-TC Pelican dropships flying in a straight line towards a former UNSC outpost in the middle of the desert. They flew high enough to

bypass the craggy mesas strewn throughout the sands, with the only wavering in their flight course due to turbulence in the air. Inside the Pelican at the head of the 'convoy' was Corporal Avery Junior Johnson, a tough 27-year-old man with dark skin who, at that moment, felt nothing but apprehension. When he had enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2502, he had volunteered to be part of a program designed to help enhance the combat capabilities of soldiers. Dubbed the ORION Project, it had turned out to be a success: every mission the UNSC had thrown at rebels or terrorists ended in the former's favor if it was spearheaded by ORION candidates. However, the battles had taken their toll; by 2506, less than half of the three hundred ORION soldiers were still alive. Now, Johnson and twenty-nine of his former ORION comrades had been ordered to take back a UNSC compound that had recently fallen into the hands of members of the "Freedom and Liberation Party", and he couldn't feel more nervous. He started humming the tune to his favorite flip music song _Shreddin'_, which caused the soldiers sitting next to him to chuckle and join in. They would have undoubtedly been singing the song had the parameters of the mission not called for nearly complete silence. As the Pelicans neared their destination, the woman in charge of the mission, Lieutenant Anya Fergusson, an ORION since 2493, stood up and stared at the soldiers under her command.

"Listen up, troops," she said, her voice barely louder than normal. "Facility Kilo X-Ray Sixteen is two minutes away. As you all know, the operation beacon at this deserted storage facility was raised unexpectedly four days ago. The regional CENTCOM sent a drone in to investigate, and it was determined that a rebel force has set up that facility as a makeshift nuclear missile launch range, with at least two FENRIS warheads possibly ready to launch. Our job is to neutralize the Innies and disarm those missiles, and then bring the payloads back to CENTCOM. Any questions?" The silence that answered her was enough for her to smile and load a fresh clip into her M6E handgun. "Then let's do this."

The Pelicans dropped below a mesa, and ten soldiers got out of each one. Johnson, his MA5 assault rifle in tow, walked up to Private James Lee, a twenty-one year old with a knack for troublemaking. Lee smiled at Johnson as the latter walked up to him. "Hey, Aves!" he whispered, using a nickname Johnson hated. "I bet I can take out more Innies than you!" Johnson sighed, and then smacked Lee upside the head. Even though he received glares from Fergusson and other soldiers, he still told Lee, "in your dreams, Jimmy." Fergusson took a moment to shake her head. She motioned for two ORIONs to climb the mesa and take up sniping positions. They both started clambering up the rocky edge, but it was less steep towards the top and they got there with relative ease.

"LT, we've got three guards up on a catwalk," Corporal Andy Norren said. "Both warheads are there, towards the vehicle depot of the compound." Fergusson led Lee, Johnson and the other soldiers to the edge of the mesa. They were just over half a mile away from the compound, which was composed of only a handful of large buildings and a few smaller ones. The two warheads were easy to locate, as they were both over eight feet tall and in an area heavily illuminated by strobe lights. A quick look upwards revealed two guards, silhouetted against the full moon, standing on a catwalk connecting the second floors of two of the larger buildings. They were conversing as a third one stood nearby, sipping a drink. Lieutenant Fergusson led her team closer to the compound, using the darkness as cover. Johnson

noticed that they weren't taking the dusty main road, but were instead using the sand to mask their footsteps. He was just about to ask Fergusson about the danger of landmines when he heard a blaring noise. Looking about forty feet to his right, just next to the road he saw a red pinprick of light. It was a proximity detector, which was a safer option than a landmine for both parties involved, but a dastardly defense nonetheless.

The ORIONs rushed towards the compound, but the guards didn't fire at them. They had had high-velocity rounds put in their skulls by the duo of snipers. As the soldiers moved closer towards the warheads, Johnson saw a bright light come from a window of one of the smaller buildings to his left, and Lieutenant Fergusson fell down with a cry of pain and a trio of bullets fired from a battle rifle lodged inside her neck. Lee took cover behind a shoddy grey building and fired at the hostile, along with a half-dozen other soldiers. Johnson watched as an M12-LRV Warthog burst from within the vehicle depot near where the warheads were, with a man driving it, another manning the turret of the vehicle, and a woman with a rocket launcher aimed at the soldiers. Johnson unclipped a grenade from his belt and threw it towards the undercarriage of the vehicle, which exploded shortly after the vehicle crossed over it, sending the Hog tumbling towards more ORIONs. They unloaded bullets from multiple different guns at the passengers, killing the man and woman up front, but the man on the turret fired, killing two more troops before a sniper round took his head off. Johnson and a handful of soldiers weaved in between the buildings, trying to evade getting hit by bullets streaming from the upper floors of buildings and from Insurrectionists on the ground. He fired at one man, hitting him in the arm, and an ORION named Carl Ziegler finished him off with a shot from his battle rifle to the man's chest. "We're in a tight spot, Avery," he said as he reloaded. Indeed, they were wedged between two drab structures with Insurrectionists firing at them from above. "I'm going to make a break for the warheads and try to disarm them. Cover me." Johnson barely had time to nod before Ziegler ran from their hiding space, firing at a group of rebels hiding behind a nearby barricade. As he and Johnson sprinted the thirty meters towards the place where the missiles were, he fell down onto his knees, blood streaming from a wound in his back, and Johnson turned around to see an Insurrectionist with a magnum not three meters away turning his gun to face him. Johnson kicked the gun out of his grasp, and punched him in the face, causing him to crumple to the ground, clutching a broken nose. Johnson ignored the wounded rebel and continued making his way to the missiles, dodging bullets as he did so. Once he got to them, he knelt down in front of one and quickly removed the paneling covering up where the some of the payload would be. He turned around to see a rebel get shot by a shotgun wielded by a fellow ORION, but other than that there were no allies or enemies near him. Johnson turned his attention back to defusing the payload—except there wasn't a payload. He peered inside the missile to see nothing but empty space.

"It must be the darkness," he muttered, but when he stuck his finger into the hole, his fears came into fruition. The missile was mostly empty, which meant someone had removed the explosive payload. "No, no, no. Dammit, this isn't happening!" he cried with bitter angst. A bullet flew past his head, hitting the metal shell of the missile and coming close to ricocheting into Johnson's eye. Johnson got up and ran behind the missile, using this cover to open a comm channel to the one of the pilots. "Fracas! The nukes are hollow, I repeat,

the nukes are hollow! The Innie bastards must've taken the payload somewhere else!" Soon after he screamed that into his comm, he got a reply from the pilot whose callsign was Fracas.

"Those dirty rotten no-good sons and daughters ofâ€¦|did you get 'em all, corporal?"

Johnson listened, and he could still hear the sounds of gunfire amongst the structures. "Negative, sir. It's hot down here." A resounding explosion occurred just as he finished, and he watched as a powerful Scorpion tank painted in garish grey-and-red hues rolled out from the vehicle depot, obliterating another building. "They've got a tank! Do not pick us up, Fracas!" Johnson crouched down behind the hollow missile and prayed that no more people would have to die that day. He heard a whine, followed by an explosion, and then a much louder explosion, followed by a cry of agony. He crouched there until he heard multiple cries of victory, at which point he warily stood up and looked to where the tank had been. Standing atop it was an ORION soldier. Two rebels lay wounded at the feet of three more. Johnson, sweating profusely under his marine BDU, walked steadily towards the soldiers. He looked at a structure across from the vehicle depot where another rebel prisoner was being escorted towards the main group, with Lee happily sticking the barrel of his gun in between her shoulder blades. As he walked past Johnson, he smirked and mouthed the word 'three'. The older man glared at him and replied, in a soft yet commanding tone, "killing human beings isn't something you should be proud about, Lee." The lighter-skinned young man shrugged, and forced his prisoner into a kneeling position next to her captured brothers-in-arms. A fourth prisoner was carried towards the others while being supported by two ORIONS, who haphazardly dumped him on the ground. The man groaned softly, and his battered grey helmet fell off his head. Johnson recognized him as the man who he had dispatched and broken the nose of earlier. He counted the ORIONS gathered around the circle in his head. There were twenty-one of them. Discounting the snipers up on the mesa, that meant seven soldiers had died. They had taken out forty-eight rebels in less than thirty minutes.

Corporal Norren and his fellow sniper Katie Evans had embarked on Fracas's Pelican shortly after it began to hover the kilometer to the extraction point. When they arrived, they were met by noticeably fewer faces than they had set out with, and nearly all those faces were grim. The ORIONS silently got onto the Pelicans, and the prisoners were kept under careful watch. The bodies of the servicemen and servicewomen killed were brought aboard one of the Pelicans as well, to be given a full military burial later on. The last soldier who got onto the final Pelican to depart was Avery Johnson. He had ran off towards the missiles and fiddled around with them, and when he got onto the Pelican, he took an M4 Field Disk out of his helmet and handed it to Norren, who slipped it inside his own helmet. Norren saw a few seconds of Johnson prying open some paneling on one of the warheads, only to reveal an empty inside. A quick look on Johnson's part to the other missile revealed the same thing. "My Godâ€¦|" Norren said as he handed the chip back to Johnson. "Where did theyâ€¦|how did theyâ€¦|"

"No idea, Andy," Avery replied solemnly. "They obviously had very skilled technicians, but I don't know where they took the payload to." He sighed and gripped the sides of his head in anger. "Those damn prisoners had better tell us everything we need to know." The

soldiers were silent. They had lost friends, and they were tired and angry. Evans checked her TACPAD to see the time. It was 12:15 on the morning of February 23 when Pelican Bravo 009 docked with the UNSC frigate Eidolon. As Evans took off her helmet and ran a hand through her curly red hair, she looked out the window at the back of the transport and became one of the few people to see the explosion that would forever change human history.

The city of Haven was one with intrepid nightlife. Gamblers, thieves and even worse degenerate scum came out to frolic at night. But even as Emoris shined upon the city, letting its pale light fall upon the towering tesseract-shaped residential apartment home to over four million of the city's inhabitants-nearly half of its population-the city was unusually active. People were talking, eating and having a carefree time even after midnight. Most people in the Haven Arcology, however, were sleeping, but it was still no surprise to the janitor when a blatantly drunk young couple walked in, laughing, and swiped a keycard to get inside one of the twenty-five elevators. The man, the janitor noted, had a large duffle bag looped over one shoulder, but he saw nothing odd about that. The janitor, due to having worked the last two hours straight, decided that he, too, should go and get some rest. It was 12:02, anyways, and he was only supposed to work until midnight. As such, he put away his cleaning supplies in the main janitorial supply closet and put his olive green coat on. As he strode across the empty lobby and out of the building, he took a moment to marvel at it. It was six hundred stories tall, the fifth-tallest building in the city. The building was divided into two sections: there was a hollowed-out cube on the outside and, inside, suspended by eight supporting walkways from various angles, was the second half, a 150 by 150 story cube, which hung above a grand park, with various native plants and even a small lake. The janitor sighed; he was somewhat disappointed that he didn't live in such a beautiful structure. Still, the cost to own an apartment there was outrageous. He walked over to his sleek white car, started it up, and drove away, eager to reunite with his wife and children at his house. He was a few blocks away from the arcology when he heard a massive explosion. The shockwave caused a hundred-story office building next to the arcology to crumble, with some of the debris falling down only feet behind his ruined car. He was shocked and scared, with his car on its side by a streetlight. He heard people screaming, and, crawling out of the wreckage of his car, saw a massive dust cloud spreading out from the building he had been at only a quarter of an hour before. "What's going on?" he croaked. No one heard him. People were busy fleeing in a mass exodus away from the arcology. Already, the piercing wail of police and fire department vehicles could be heard over the cacophony of people yelling. Thick smoke made the night darker, and fires raged unchecked for a block surrounding the ruined husk of the Haven Arcology.

Fifteen minutes earlier, a man and a woman walked into their apartment on the seventh floor inside the inner building of the arcology. The man took a duffle bag off his shoulder and put it on the linen bed sheets, while the woman pulled a chip out of her purse. Together, they took a jumbled mass of wires and blocks of metal out of the bag, and began plugging certain wires into an outlet in the room, along with more wires into the blocks of metal in different stages of assembly. They worked carefully, showing that they were not amateurs and had practiced doing exactly this setup multiple times before. Both participants were busy flipping switches and turning on various buttons, until finally they had a flashing, beeping mess that

looked vaguely like someone had taken the inside of a missile out and put it back together without the metal casing. In actuality, that was exactly what had occurred. The woman slipped outside the door and knocked four times on the apartment adjacent to the one with the missile in it. A heavysset man with a thin beard opened the door and asked, "Did you finish construction?" The woman nodded, at which point the man slipped a few gears and screws into her outstretched hand, and, while she went back into her own room, lugged a conical device into her room. The other man looked at it and gulped. "I guess this is it, huh?"

The woman nodded, and kissed the bearded man on the cheek, and then the younger man on the lips. "Dad," she said to the bearded one, "please let us have our final moments together." The heavysset man nodded, as his daughter and her boyfriend walked out the door. He connected a few wires into the cone, and finally input the chip his daughter had kept inside her purse into it. On one of the flashing metal pieces, red numbers showed up on a screen: a three, then a two, followed by a one. Each number had a barely audible beep accompany it. When a zero appeared on the screen, the explosion occurred.

The lower halves of both sections of the arcology were reduced to ashes. A crater appeared in the ground stretching half a kilometer deep. Two buildings next to the arcology toppled to the ground due to the shockwaves, though neither was as tall or impressive as it. Cars on the streets near it were either obliterated or thrown into other buildings. Due to the fact that most bodies were completely disintegrated in the explosion, the death toll would never be figured out. The police estimated it at around two million fatalities, and, due to the shockwave, fires, debris and power outages that sprouted throughout the city, over four million people were hurt, though around two million of them were only slightly injured. It would remain the worst loss of life recorded in human history for only fourteen years.

March 7, 2511

New York City, Earth

The United Nations Space Command Supreme Headquarters, also known as UNSC High Command Facility Alpha-1, was an impressive structure. It was a solid grey, with a massive skylight taking up the entirety of the ceiling. It was well over forty stories tall, but it was much longer than it was tall. Avery Johnson gulped as he stepped out of his red car, staring at the enormity of the building. It was only a short walk from the parking lot towards the main entrance, but the army soldiers standing at the exit of the lot obviously thought he needed an escort. One of them walked up to him. "Corporal Avery J. Johnson, serial number 48789-20114-AJ?" he asked. Johnson, dressed in a business suit he normally reserved for weddings or funerals, responded with a simple, "That's me." The army trooper handed him a lanyard with Johnson's own name, face and rank on it. "Keep that on at all times," he ordered. He led Johnson across the street and through the large glass doors leading into the facility, with two more troops following behind them. Inside, there was a short hallway leading to a massive atrium, with hundreds of busy workers at desks. There was a monument towards the back of the room, with stairwells leading up to multiple levels. Johnson was too far away to see who the monument honored, but he was lead up a stairwell to a set of elevators. "They want you down there," the army sergeant told him.

Johnson gripped the lanyard nervously, and then took one final look at the bright blue sky. He walked into the elevator, followed by the three troops, all of whom betrayed no emotion and kept their hands clenched behind their backs.

Johnson, in an effort to lighten the mood, jokingly said, "You're not gonna shoot me, are ya?" To his surprise, the troopers chuckled. The sergeant replied, "No, Mr. Johnson. It's just that this meeting is top secret." With that, he clicked the one button three times in a row, and then pushed the down button on the elevator. There was a lack of elevator music, which Johnson was a little disappointed at. After about thirty seconds, he was worried, and was about to ask how far down the group was going when the elevator doors opened. Johnson and the soldiers were in a well-lit cavern, with stone walls and an oval floor plan. Johnson slicked back his short black hair and stepped out of the elevator. He began to walk towards a crescent-shaped table, which was the only piece of furniture in the room. Sitting at the table were four men and two women, with another, much younger woman standing nearby, writing in an old-fashioned journal. Johnson had to hold back a gasp as he recognized one of the men, who was featured prominently on television: President of the Unified Earth Government Akito Sato.

"Welcome, Corporal Johnson. No doubt you know who I am," the president said. He adjusted his glasses and stared with a cold glare at Johnson, who only replied with a nod. After a few seconds, he recognized his mistake, and said, "Yes, sir." The president was unimpressed. He motioned to his right. "These are Rear Admiral Hieronymus Stanforth of FLEETCOM, and Admiral Henry Carlo of NAVSPECWAR." The rear admiral, with light brown hair and bright blue eyes, nodded in Johnson's direction. His superior, with olive skin and greying black skin glanced briefly at the corporal, but quickly looked away. The president continued. "To my left is Admiral Athena Caldwell of NavLogCom, Vice Admiral Ysionris Jeromi of the Med Corps and Rear Admiral Margaret Parangosky, representing ONI." The former of the two women uncrossed her arms to slightly wave her hand, while the man sitting next to her smiled at him. The rear admiral did absolutely nothing, not even looking at him like Admiral Carlo had done. "Who's she, then?" Johnson asked, pointing to the woman writing in her journal. She had short, neatly combed black hair and had piercing blue eyes, and she was wearing a lab coat. The woman couldn't have been older than twenty. She looked up at Johnson. "Catherine Elizabeth Halsey," she said. "I am an intern at ONI and I am currently studying under Rear Admiral Parangosky's tutelage." She resumed writing in her journal. Johnson took note of her, but turned his attention to the president. "The memo said you wanted me to relay information about my mission on Mamore, sir."

"Precisely, Corporal. Spare no details. Tell us what went right and what went wrong." The men and women in the room, even the intern Halsey, stared at Johnson. He couldn't lie even if he wanted to.

"Well, we infiltrated the facility after being dropped off. Two snipers climbed the mesa we had put the Pelicans behind to--"

"Corporal Johnson, without the snipers, would your mission have ended in failure?" Parangosky asked.

"Well, they certainly took out more rebels than the rest of us," Johnson recanted. "We might not have failed, but a lot more than seven of us would've been killed. Anyways, the snipers took out the guards, and we went into the camp. One of our soldiers was taken out by an enemy sniper. Our team engaged in a firefight with the rebel forces. One man was killed by a pistol shot to the back right in front of me." Johnson watched out of the corner of his eye as Halsey wrote something in her journal. '_What is she taking notes about?_' he wondered. He continued, "I got to the missiles and tried to disarm them, but they had been dismantled, had the important components taken out, and put back together. We took out a Warthog, and later a Scorpion, but suffered casualties due to them."

"Do you think better armor may have given your troops better chances to survive?"

"Of course, Mister President."

"And how did the soldiers react during the battle? Were they on-task, or were they cocky?"

"Mostly they were focused, but the thrill of battle got to them, and they might've not looked before they leapt. If you grasp my meaning, Admiral Carlo."

"I do, Johnson. Now, does anyone else have any more questions?" Immediately, Halsey raised her voice again.

"Corporal, what do you think would have made it possible to complete that mission without any casualties?"

Johnson stood still, and said nothing for quite some time. "Well, better armor for one thing. I guessâ€¦well, we're the best soldiers there are. We took rigorous training, ran all the simulations and mastered them, and the biochemical enhancements certainly helped a lot. I don't think it would be possible to find better troops. They weren't born for the combat we endured."

Halsey stared intensely at Johnson, as if a realization had struck her. "Neither were you," she said in a menacing tone. She whispered something in Parangosky's ear. The older woman piqued up at whatever it was Halsey said, and motioned for Halsey to repeat it to the president, which she did. The president was aghast. "No! We could never! It's inhumane, we couldn't do that!"

"Sir, with all due respect, we don't want another Mamore to occur," Parangosky said. The president mulled it over, then said, "Leave us," to the army soldiers. When they walked up to the elevator, he said, "You too, Mr. Johnson. Thank you for your contributions."

"Sir, are you trying to make more ORION troops? Your predecessor deemed them ineffective to end the Insurrectionist threat. He said the casu-"

"I'm well aware of what Miguel Ortiz said, and I know what his reasons were for terminating a continuation of ORION soldiers. I've said enough. If you wish to keep your rank, leave us now. My colleagues and I have important matters to discuss." Johnson said nothing, but followed the trio of army troopers into the elevator. "What do you suppose that was all about?" he asked the sergeant. The

brown-haired man just shrugged. "Something about the soldiers of tomorrow or some crap like that? I dunno."

"In my experience," Johnson replied, "the soldiers of tomorrow are the ones born today."

March 7, 2511

Elysium City, Eridanus II

The hospital room was crammed full of people. There were five doctors, along with a young man and his wife. The wife was partaking in the extremely painful process of giving birth, and the doctors were trying to ensure that she and the soon-to-be-newborn were stable and healthy. The woman conversed violently. "C'mon, push! That's it, that it! You're doing great honey, just-"

"Shut _up!_" the woman cried. She let out one more agonizing shriek as the doctors finally removed something from inside of her, and the cries of a newborn baby filled the room instantaneously. Quickly, one of the doctors rushed to get the blood off the newborn. Another one turned to the new father. "Congratulations, Mr. Jones," he said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "It's a boy." The doctor came back with the boy wrapped in a towel and presented him to his exhausted mother. "Do you two have a name picked out?" she inquired. The father nodded. As the doctors finished up with removing the umbilical cord from his wife, he told the doctor the name of his son. "We decided to name him after both of our fathers. Strangely enough, they both had the same name. It's a fairly common one, but still."

"Really? What's the little tyke's name gonna be then?" the doctor asked. The father responded with a simple, one-word reply:

"John."

2. Many meetings

****December 8, 2516****

****Sera, Circumstance****

Franklin Mendez, Chief Petty Officer in the UNSC Navy, was doing something that he felt was increasingly rare: relaxing. He was lying on his tan leather couch with his head leaning against a pillow, reading the classic novel The Lord of the Flies by William Golding. A half-drained cup of blueberry juice was positioned on the coffee table that was in between the couch and the television viewscreen-Mendez was fond of blueberries. He bookmarked the page he was on and set the book on the table. Reverting to a sitting position, he drank more of the juice, and then casually wiped off the liquid that stubbornly remained on his upper lip. As he peered out the window that was directly to the right of the viewscreen, he couldn't help but notice how cloudy the sky was. It would certainly rain soon, which made Mendez cancel his decision to go on a walk through the park located a block away. He was about to resume reading when he noticed a black van pull up on his driveway. He was confused at this, and got up. To his surprise, a woman stepped out of the van, with immaculately neat black hair and a dark pair of sunglasses on.

She was wearing a black suit paired with a black skirt. Everything about her screamed ONI, which made Mendez a little upset. She would make a terrible girlfriend if she worked there, which was a shame, as she was a pretty woman and couldn't have been older than his twenty-nine years. When she rang the doorbell, Mendez opened the door.

Visually, the man was impressive, but Catherine Halsey knew that it was his devotion to his work that had made her come to his nonchalant one-story home in Sera. He had slightly tanned skin, and had a buzz cut of black hair. His eyes were the color of coffee, inviting, yet bitter nonetheless. He was, according to the records, a man who showed no nonsense, but who also cared about those under his command.

Franklin Mendez would make an excellent trainer for a group of child soldiers.

"What do you want?" Mendez asked, warily looking over the woman at his doorstep. Halsey offered her hand, which Mendez shook.

"Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, scientific advisor at the Office of Naval Intelligence. I presume that I am addressing Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez, serial number 02238-95657-FM?" Mendez nodded.

"Yes, ma'am. May I ask why you're here, doctor?" He smoothed his red shirt and stood to one side of the door, allowing Halsey to walk in. She glanced around at the house: a living room with a viewscreen and a couch, with a rack of books touching the far wall. Behind a short wall behind the couch was a kitchen with a fridge, oven, sink and a table. Beyond that, adjacent to the living room, she could make out a bedroom, with a bathroom no doubt near there. The kitchen and, assumingly, the bathroom had a wooden floor; the rest of the house had a grey carpet. Overall, the house was nondescript; unassuming. Why had she chosen Mendez again? Oh yes, there it was: when she opened a drawer in the kitchen, against Mendez's shouts to her, she saw multiple pieces of paper, and various medals. They were all for him, but the papers contained letters from soldiers he had trained. When a fuming Mendez came to take one letter away from him, Halsey put out a hand just in front of his chest. She mumbled the words on the paper and, when she was done, she put it back and took off her sunglasses.

"Is Petty Officer Alexa Donokivitch still alive, Chief Mendez?" she asked, using the name of the soldier who had written the letter.

"Of course she is!" Mendez yelled. "I've trained multiple batches of soldiers, even ODSTs, and my troops have a ninety percent survival rate! I teach my soldiers what is necessary for them to survive in the field-I've been doing it since I was twenty! I have trained men and women twice my age on how to make sure their sorry asses survive the battlefield!"

Halsey cut him off with a stare that probably froze him to the bone. "Have you suffered loss, Chief?"

Mendez sighed, but showed no sign of soft-heartedness. "My mother and brother died in a car accident when I was thirteen. My father was killed by the Innies on a business trip four years ago."

"On Mamore?"

"Of course on Mamore!"

Halsey, remembering that there had been some blueberry juice on the table in the living room, opened up Mendez's fridge and took out a bottle of some. "May I?" she asked.

"I'd prefer if you didn't. You've already rummaged through enough of my stuff."

Halsey ignored him and opened the juice. "You'd better learn to deal with insubordination," she said, taking a swig. "Tell me," she asked after she had finished drinking, "how often do you interact with children?"

"Extremely rarely," Mendez responded, eyeing Halsey angrily. "Why do you ask?"

"Would you consider that children are like your trainees? Would you whip them into shape, as you would those men and women, if you had any?"

"It'd be quite a stretch from training soldiers, doctor, but, if necessary, I guess I could. But you still never told me why."

"Chief, your soldiers are legendary among the Navy. You are one of the best instructors the UNSC has. You have been in active combat roles, but your records state that you continually request to be transferred to become a drill instructor. You enjoy testing and honing the skills of soldiers, Chief." Mendez was silent, and went into the living room to reclaim his bottle of juice. When he came back, he was slightly more talkative.

"What do you need me for, doctor? Why are you here?"

Halsey smiled. "Tell me, have you ever heard of the ORION program?"

****August 16, 2517****

****Elysium City, Eridanus II****

The bus pulled to a stop at the quiet intersection of the two streets. The driver opened its doors, and said, "Alright, end of the line!" The two passengers still on the bus bounded up towards the front of the bus. The girl, a bouncy, pretty little thing wearing a bright green dress with an identically-colored head band in her short black hair, waved to the driver. "Thanks, Mr. Vince!" The driver chuckled.

"Bye, Parisa," he replied. He then turned towards the bus's sole remaining occupant, a little boy with a full head of brown hair and a slightly freckled face. The boy had been loud on the bus that day, as usual. He was always talking excitedly about something that had gone on at the Primary Education Facility. Still, the driver didn't mind his boisterous behavior, for the boy was always nice to him, and presumably nice to all those older than him. He was only a jerk to

the other little kids, especially when he won at whatever sport it was he played at recess that particular day.

"Bye, Mr. Vince!" the boy exclaimed with all the sincerity of his friend.

"See you later, John," the driver said as the boy stepped off the bus. He waited as the duo walked down the sidewalk towards their homes. When he saw a dark-skinned older boy of around 17 walk by seconds later and give him a thumbs-up, he knew it was alright to leave. The children were in good hands.

John turned around when he heard the sound of footsteps running quickly towards him. He instinctively thought the approaching person would be dangerous, but it turned out to only be his next-door neighbor and good friend Emile Fr mont. The young man was seventeen, but took a liking to little children like John. According to Emile, he was John and Parisa's 'babysitter', but John thought that, since he was six years old, the title was a little embarrassing. He wasn't a baby anymore!

"Hey, hey, hey, Elysium Ci-tay! It's everyone's favorite _celebrity couple_" Emile said, ruffling his neighbor's heads. Parisa blushed and adjusted her headband, but John simply let the ruffling come and took it. A little less than a year ago, he had saved Parisa from drowning in the nearby Lake Gusev. He hadn't wanted for his friend to die, but, having recently learned about something called 'marriage', he had promised Parisa that he would marry her and keep her safe from harm. After asking Emile about it, he was somewhat hesitant after learning what marriage was all about. Apparently, this made Parisa his 'fianc e', which was one step up on the relationship scale than Emile and his girlfriend Cecilia. Emile told him that it meant he really loved Parisa. When John pointed out that of course he loved her, alongside Emile, his parents, and his other friends, Emile had simply chuckled and said it would all make sense when John was older. John wasn't exactly trembling with anticipation for that day to come.

"What's up, Emile?" John asked. "Did your gravball team win yesterday?"

Emile nodded. "We sure did! Twenty to sixteen, it was a close match!"

"Cool!" Parisa said. "It's a shame we missed it. It would've been so fun to watch! At the PEF they don't let us use hard balls; we've got to use the sissy soft ones. Plus they put pads over the prongs of the gravsticks so we can't poke each other in the eyes. Teachers think we're so violent."

Emile nodded. "Hey, they're right, y'know. I wouldn't want any kid of mine poking people's eyes out with anything!"

"Aww, but that's half the fun about it!" John mocked. Emile shoved John a little, which caused him to giggle like crazy.

"Hey, you're a tough guy, little man. How many kids have you sent to the nurse's office this past week?"

John shrugged, pretending to be nonchalant about the crack at his

height. Yes, he was shorter than Emile, but he was also tough as Emile had said. "Only two. They were picking on Parisa for not giving them her lunch at school yesterday. They were like nine or ten, too!" John, Parisa and Emile stopped in front of a house five houses away from the end of the street. "Okay, this is where the little lady goes," Emile said as he gave Parisa a pat on her shoulder. "See ya later, Pari."

"Bye Emile!" Parisa said enthusiastically. John then walked up to Parisa and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Bye," he mumbled.

"Bye," she responded. Both of them were blushing, and Parisa ran straight into the house. Emile couldn't stop laughing.

"See, little man? You do love her!" John shrugged once again and pretended Emile was wrong. He followed Emile over to the latter's house, distinguishable for a tree with yellow leaves being in its lawn. "Alright, catch you later, John," Emile said, presenting his fist to John. The latter bumped it with his own tiny fist.

"Bye, Emile," he said. He continued walking alone for the few feet between his and Emile's houses, and readjusted his bright orange backpack as he looked up at the sky. It was a bright, clear day. These were his favorite kind of days, where the enormity of the planet was revealed to him. When he squinted, he could make out the asteroids surrounding the planet; a ring of them floating in space. He looked to the left and saw the main city, with its skyscrapers being the only visible thing on the horizon. His house was at the edge of town; a large, empty field was behind it. John reminisced for a few seconds about all the times he and his friends had played tag or kickball in the field. The world was so big, and he was oh so small. When he first learned that there were other planets out there, he was astounded; when he learned that there weren't vast alien civilizations, he was a little disappointed. He wanted desperately to go into space, but it wouldn't happen for a while. Slowly, he walked inside his house, right into the waiting arms of his mother.

"Hey, Johnny!" she said as she embraced her son. Her curly brown hair enveloped John's eyes, and she had obviously been washing the dishes recently: she smelled like soap. John returned the hug, even though he hated that childish name.

"Hi, mommy. Iâ€|can'tâ€|breatheâ€|" he joked, which caused his mother to stop her crushing hug.

"Do you have any homework?" his mom asked. John profusely shook his head, and took a plump yellow ouva fruit from a bowl on a table that he barely reached. He took off his backpack, setting it on a chair, and took his shoes off as well. He meandered over to the couch and sat down, happily munching on the fruit. He turned on the television viewscreen, and was greeted by a documentary detailing the possibilities of extraterrestrial sentient life. Unlike most children, John enjoyed these scientific programs. Parisa watched them too, which was one reason the two were such good friends. Speaking of Parisaâ€|

"Mom?" he called to his mother, who was putting away cutlery in the kitchen. "Pari said her parents were going to the movies tomorrow

night. Could she come here?"

"The movies, eh? The Rezais have the right idea! Of course she can, sweetie!"

That was John's mother: eternally optimistic and deeply devoted to her son. Her husband was the same way. They both loved their son just as much as they loved each other.

Robert and Caroline Jones would be devastated if anything happened to their son.

****August 17, 2511****

****Above Eridanus II****

Lieutenant Junior Grade Jacob Keyes woke up coughing. He shook his head and emerged, naked, from the cryotube, as anyone would if they didn't want their clothes to stick to their body and cause painful burns. As soon as he set foot on the metallic ground, memories came flooding back to him. He remembered that he was on a small craft known as the Han. This tiny ship was used mainly by wealthy families, and had enough room for a half-dozen people. Keyes also remembered what his task was. He noticed a rack of civilian clothing-a khaki shirt and white pants-and put them on, grumbling. He ignored the multi-colored lights flashing in the cryobay and walked through the ship's miniscule kitchen and onto the bridge, where he was reunited with the other occupant of the craft.

"We were in Slipspace for less than ten hours, Lieutenant, couldn't you have at least attempted to stay awake and not crawl into a cryotube?" That voice belonged to the brilliant, beautiful doctor Catherine Halsey. She was sitting in the pilot's chair and reading a magazine on her tablet. Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 was playing over the ship's speakers. Keyes sighed deeply and stared with a frown on his face at Halsey, who clicked a button and the music stopped. They both stared through the semicurved cockpit window at the world in front of them. Eridanus II was surrounded by a large asteroid belt. Its sole moon, Ehilend, loomed just beyond the belt. It was a small world, with only four million inhabitants, and its moon wasn't even colonized. The belt, however, was: innumerable Insurrectionists and pirates lived throughout it. The UNSC knew they were there, but they didn't know exactly where, and the higher-ups were wary of how many lives might be lost if they attempted to drive the Innies out of the asteroids. After all, they had tried once before, and it hadn't worked.

"Doctor Halsey, despite your dislike for it, I do enjoy cryosleep. What I don't enjoy is the fact that you took me away from my post without so much as a word on why you did so." Keyes took out his pipe-a gift from his grandfather for his twenty-first birthday last year-and started fiddling with it. It's not like he could smoke the thing, anyways.

"I put in a recommendation for your temporary transfer away from the Magellan because Vice Admiral Michael Stanforth-yes, I know his first name is Hieronymus and I know he hates it-wanted a Naval officer onboard this shuttle to 'protect' me. That's his reason. I want you here for another reason-you have a rare gift among UNSC personnel. You, Jacob Keyes, can keep a secret."

"Whatâ€¦what are you talking about, Doctor Halsey?"

The doctor clicked a few buttons to prepare the ship for atmospheric entry, and then faced Keyes. "You know fully well what I'm talking about. What was the first thing I told you when we met? 'Hello, Lieutenant Keyes. I have perused through your files, and I must say, I'm impressed,' is what I recall saying. I'm referring to a specific instance that occurred during your second year of OCS training."

Keyes rubbed the back of his neck, and diverted his eyes from Doctor Halsey. "Oh, right," he mumbled. "That."

"Fourteen ensigns killed, you and seven other ensigns wounded. Your CO told you all a secret that he was going to test a new theory on how to make more accurate Slipspace jumps. The experiment, needless to say, failed. Despite the testimony of officers and friends, you and you alone never testified against him. Of course, he was eventually court-martialed, but you never told anyone of the secret. By the time this mission is over, you may have to keep many more."

The craft flew towards the ground, piercing the fluffy white clouds. Below lay a vast lake, surrounded by a massive plain. It was bordered on one side by a sprawling city, with the tallest buildings over seven hundred stories tall. Next to the city lay the suburbs, with shorter buildings, mostly houses, that stretched on for over a mile or more. On a large island next to the city were even more skyscrapers, with two bridges connecting the two cities. Keyes couldn't help but marvel at this incredible sight as the _Han_ flew towards the island. "What do you mean?" Keyes asked, fidgeting with his shirt. "Why Eridanus? Why do I have civilian clothes on?"

"Relax, Jacob. I'll put mine on soon enough. As you know, this is an intel mission, but we aren't here to look for Insurrectionists as you may have thought. We are here to observe a boy." Halsey stood up. "Now, land this craft. I have to put on my dress."

"Wait, a boy? That's it?" Keyes stopped fidgeting in his uncomfortable clothing, staring at the doctor in disbelief. "Why?"

"Because this child could be more important to the UNSC than a fleet of destroyers, a thousand admirals, or even _me_."

Keyes doubted that, and his face displayed it as Halsey stepped off the bridge. He sat in the pilot's chair and flew the ship down towards a spaceport on the island.

Two hours after they had arrived on the island, Halsey walked with her arm looped around Keyes'. She was wearing a pink ankle-length sundress with a wide-brimmed hat on of the same color. Keyes, still in his khaki shirt, helped cement the allusion that the two were a young couple beginning their life on Eridanus II. They walked, arm in arm, towards the gates leading into Elysium City Primary Education Facility 1-19. "What am I supposed to do again?" Keyes asked.

"Well, darling, I thought you wanted to go have a chat with the

principal on whether or not little Miranda could start classes here!" Halsey responded. "You go on, Jacob. I'll stay here and try to mingle with the kids-you know how good I am with them!" she added with a wink. Keyes, realizing what his cover story was, strode towards the door, never slouching once. '_Such a shame. He would make a good father_', ' Halsey thought. She walked down the sidewalk, watching the cars roll past, until she came to a little gate that led to a park adjacent to the school. It was bordered by a pair of large trees, which a few children were reading under. Halsey took out an identification packet ONI had provided for her. It contained the descriptions, names, homes and health files of the six potential candidates she had been tasked with reviewing. Twenty-four other teams, headed by various ONI personnel, along with Franklin Mendez, had been assigned the remaining one hundred forty-four children. Their goal was to gather information on them, and see if they would make good soldiers for Halsey's program. Recently, she had come up with a name for it, but she hadn't pitched the idea to Mendez, Parangosky or anyone else yet. She'd tell them later.

The first file contained the information on the subject she was here to observe: John Jones, subject 117. According to the reports, he was born on March 3, 2511. He had brown hair, a few freckles, and a slight gap between his front teeth. The report said nothing about his personality. Halsey unlatched the gate and walked into the recess area, nodding to the young children that looked at her with unbridled curiosity. She strolled down a little stone path, gripping her hat in fear that the wind would tug it off her head. Inside the park, there were a few benches-all occupied-and a set of hopscotch squares. Some students were engaged in a game of tag. All told, there were well over seventy children in the park. It would've been difficult to locate young Mr. Jones had one of the students eating a sandwich at a nearby bench not turned to her friend and whisper, "Do you want to go play some gravball?"

"Nah," the other girl replied. "John would probly make us go through some dumb initiation and we'd hurt ourselves. He's such a jerk on the court!"

Halsey, clenching her fist to ward off the need to correct the little girl on remembering to use the second syllable of 'probably', looked towards an open grey pit in the ground which was closer to the school. Sounds of battle and shrieks of delight echoed from inside of it. It would appear that subject 117 was quite the soldier already.

Even before she could see inside the pit, Halsey's suspicions turned into fact. "Evelyn! Tim! Gary's trying to get open, make sure he doesn't do that!" Halsey strode forward. Sure enough, the boy giving those orders matched exactly with Halsey's files. "Parisa, get away from Stephanie's stick! There you go!" As Halsey watched, the boy jabbed his own gravstick-basically a stick with four prongs at the end-at the gravstick of the child carrying the anti-gravity ball. It flew gracefully into the air, but immediately came falling back down into the gravity-rich suction between the prongs of John's gravstick. The pit in itself was at twenty percent gravity like in a real gravball game, but, at barely ten feet tall, forty feet long and twenty feet wide, it was only a quarter the size of the real game. The teams were smaller, as well: it was a four-against-four affair instead of the twelve-against-twelve major league teams. John bounded across the walls of the pit, and, despite the opposing team's best

efforts, managed to get close to their goal and thrust the ball in, scoring a point.

"We won!" cried one of John's teammates. John sneered at his dejected opponents, but floated over his allies and gave them all high-fives. They floated to the top of the pit and crawled out. Some students clapped for the victors. Most did not. Halsey stood off to one side.

"Excuse me," she asked when John clambered out of the pit. "Could I talk to you?" there were nervous whispers, and blatant name calling, at John, but he just shrugged it off. One girl in particular looked warily at Halsey, but John gave her a thumbs-up and a smile and walked over to Halsey, who took him gently by the shoulder and walked over to a secluded area. "What's your name, young man?"

"John," the boy replied. He offered Halsey his hand. She was surprised at how well-mannered this boy was to adults; to his superiors. He seemed to work well in a group, as well. This boy was definitely going to become one of her soldiers. But Halsey needed an excuse to have pulled John away.

"What were you doing there, John?" she asked. John smiled.

"Winning," he replied. "I like to win. It feels good."

He was arrogant, though. Halsey would need to deflate his ego a little. "You did very well. Would you like to try to win another game?"

John smirked. "What kind of game? I win at king of the hill, at gravball, at chess-" He stopped talking and stared at the coin Halsey had procured from her purse.

"This is a coin that humans used before we colonized other planets and started using credits. Do you see how it has an eagle on one side, and a man on the other? I'm going to flip it in the air. When it comes back down, I want you to tell me which side it landed on. If you get it right, you can keep the coin."

"Cool!" John closed his eyes and waited for Halsey to flip the coin. When she did so, it flipped in the air and fell in Halsey's right hand, which she covered with her left one.

"Well?" Halsey asked. Almost instantaneously, John answered back.

"Eagle!" Sure enough, when Halsey lifted away her hand, there was a picture of an eagle on the side of the coin she was gazing at. She gave the coin to John, who took it with glee and ran back to his friends to show them his prize. She felt a pang of regret for what was going to happen to his young boy, but she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, steeling herself for what needed to be done. His innocence would last a month or so more, hers was long gone. Either way, he had a lot of luck. She should make that a priority for her future candidates.

Halsey walked back to the front gates to the school, and began perusing over her next candidate. He was a young boy from the planet

of Arcadia, born in the town of Morannon on the continent Avalon on May 14, 2511. His name was Samuel Xavier Braxton, also known as subject 034.

Keyes exited the building ten minutes later. "All set to go, honey?" he asked. Halsey nodded.

"I had a great time with the kids," she said. He took her hand and the two walked over to their rented car. He opened the door for her, and she responded by kissing his cheek. The lieutenant was obviously confused by this, but giddy at the same time. He got into the passenger's seat and Halsey started to drive. "Do I get a kiss on all these recon missions?" he asked. Halsey winked at him, but became more serious immediately afterwards.

"I think subject 117 will make a fine addition to the program. Now, remember, Jacob: you cannot tell anyone of John and the other children we will review."

Keyes nodded gravely. "Aye aye, ma'am."

3. Abduction

****August 17, 2517****

****Elysium City, Eridanus II****

Ehilend was shining brightly. John couldn't help but grin as he looked up at the vast darkness of the universe, dotted with stars. He was lying on the grass in the field behind his house, with his hands clasped on his chest. A meter away laid Parisa, her hands supporting her head. The two young children were gazing at the starry night. They had been talking about the documentary they had watched the day before, but so far only about humanity's previous attempts to contact extraterrestrial life. They hadn't talked about the future.

"Hey, Parisa?"

Her gaze shifted from the moon to her friend. "Yeah?"

"Do you ever wonder what's out there?"

She chewed her lower lip, musing over the question. "Like what?"

"Well, maybe someone up there is wondering what it's like here."

Parisa nodded. "I guess. Do you think we'll ever meet them?"

"I hope so, don't you?"

"I would if they're friendly."

John shook his head, letting it create a tiny crevasse in the dirt. "Why wouldn't they be friendly?" he asked incredulously.

All of a sudden, a cheerful voice sounded from the house. "John, Parisa! Dinner's ready!" The two children sprang up and rushed

towards the house in a mad frenzy. Parisa got there a second before John. He had let her win. They walked through a sliding glass door and into the dining room, where John's mom had prepared a feast: there was some roasted fish, and rice and bread rolls, and noodles with a sweet cheese sauce.

"Thanks, Mrs. Jones," Parisa said as she sat down at the table. She eyed the food on her plate eagerly.

"Don't thank me, darling. I promised John I'd take good care of you tonight. And in this family, we have a saying: 'never make a promise if you know you can't keep it.' Eat to your heart's content, Miss Rezai."

John's father walked into the room and sneaked a bread roll from the basket. He kissed his wife, who looked at him with mock fury in her eyes and a small smile on her face. "Thanks, sweetie," he said. He then took a bite of the roll and took a seat. His son followed suit. John's mother sat down and the family, and their guest, began eating. Half an hour after they had finished, Parisa's parents arrived to pick her up. John sent his friend off with a customary peck to her cheek. When Parisa's mom made some comment about her and John's own mom being 'in-laws' someday, John asked, "What do you mean by that, Mrs. Rezai?"

Parisa's mom smiled. "It's nothing, dear. You just be good to my daughter when you marry her, y'hear?"

All four adults cracked up. The children just shrugged, smiled at each other and waved good-bye.

In slightly less than a month, they would do it again for the last time.

****August 30, 2517****

****Military Reservation 01478-B, Reach****

Franklin Mendez strode through the front door of the main building of the compound wearing his standard instructor's uniform. A reception desk was situated in front of the entrance to a large amphitheater only a few dozen meters in front of him. Like the rest of the building, the amphitheater was made of polished marble and designed to look like it was built in Ancient Greece. Mendez noticed a steady stream of ONI personnel walking to and from this building and the others. No doubt they were preparing for the base's new arrivals. '_It's funny_', he thought. '_I haven't seen a UNSC base that was 'quarantined' three months ago seem so lively_.' He nodded to a pair of marines ONI had deemed 'worthy' to know about Halsey's program. The two saluted back and moved aside so that Mendez could enter the amphitheater. After he entered, Mendez walked down the stairs to join the two women talking to each other on the dais of the room. He saluted to them, but Margaret Parangosky and Catherine Halsey didn't salute back. "Oh, good, Chief Mendez is here. Now we can begin," Parangosky stated. "DÃ©jÃ ?"

A blue AI with the holographic form of a gorgeous woman in flowing white Grecian robes and a laurel wreath around her head appeared from a spot on the floor. She seemed to fit right in with the dÃ©cor of the building. "Hello, Chief Mendez," she said. "Are you ready to

narrow the list of candidates?"

"Yes, I am," Mendez said. "Have the two of you come up with a name for the program?"

"We have," Halsey replied. "They will be the best humanity has to offer. They will be known as SPARTANs."

Five hours later, as dusk was beginning to creep in, the three humans and their AI advisor had decided on thirty-eight boys and thirty-seven girls to bring to the compound out of the 150 children, with 75 reviewed children of each gender. The final roster:

Valeria-002, Jennifer-004, James-005, Jai-006, Li-008, Naomi-010, Isabelle-013, Destiny-016, Kirk-018, Serin-019, Daisy-023, Kayla-025, Joshua-029, Vinh-030, Vishan-031, Ralph-033, Samuel-034, Amy-036, Randall-037, Isaac-039, Tony-041, Douglas-042, William-043, Anton-044, Keiichi-047, Jane-049, Jack-050, Kurt-051, Jorge-052, Steve-057, Linda-058, Malcolm-059, Lea-061, Maria-062, Shiela-065, Soren-066, Ashley-067, Solomon-069, Benjamin-073, Cassandra-075, Vanessa-077, Arthur-079, RenÃ©-081, Fhadjad-084, Kelly-087, Mark-088, Jerome-092, Grace-093, Musa-096, Priya-099, Victor-101, Frederic-104, Timothy-106, Craig-107, Adrianna-111, Sarah-113, Tara-114, Ivan-116, John-117, Penelope-119, Michael-120, Joseph-122, Erik-123, Bianca-125, Yasmine-128, Alice-130, Lilly-132, Gwen-136, Carris-137, Calypso-141, Christine-143, Bethany-144, Sharon-145, Daniel-149 and Amanda-150.

These children, all either five or six years old, would soon become the saviors of humanity; the future of it as a species.

If they managed to survive.

"Now that we have our candidates," said an exhausted Mendez as he, Halsey and Parangosky strolled out of the building, "what will we do with them?"

"Their training will begin on September 23," Halsey stated. "I know they won't like it, and neither will I, butâ€¦it's for the greater good. Gather up some teams of marines, ONI personnel and any ORION-or, rather, SPARTAN-I-soldiers who know of their successors, and get them here by then." She stared at the dual moons of Reach: Turul and Csodaszarvas, sighing as she did so. "I'm not a religious woman, Chief, but I am most definitely going to hell for this."

****September 15, 2511****

****Elysium City, Eridanus II****

"But, _dad_, I'm not a baby anymore!" John was pacing after his father as the latter walked out of his room, putting on a black sports coat as he did so. John's father turned to him, bent down, and placed his hands on his son's shoulders.

"I know that, kiddo. But your mom and I really want this one night just to ourselves. Miss Evans isn't a babysitter, she's â€¦caretaker. She'll keep watch over you while we're out to see the movie and eat dinner."

John sniffed his nose, and rubbed it. "Can't I stay with the

FrÃ©monts? Or with Parisa and her family?"

His father offered John a small, sad smile. "I'm afraid not, Johnny. Emile and his parents are checking out tertiary schools for him, and the Rezaïs are off visiting relatives. You've met Miss Evans before, she lives right across the street. If anything goes wrong, she'll call and we'll come rushing over."

John, his eyes somewhat watery, stared at his father. "You promise?"

"I promise. And you know the saying." Together, father and son recited: "Don't make a promise if you know you can't keep it." John's dad stepped in front of a mirror outside the door and adjusted his suit and his black tie. His wife walked down the stairs, dressed in a seductive sequined black dress. Her fruity red lips twitched into a smile.

"Ready to go, Robert?"

John's father nodded. "Whenever you're ready, Caroline," he said with a wink. John's mother walked up to her husband and kissed his cheek, rubbing her hand through her husband's light brown hair. She turned her attention to her son, bending down and holding his hands in her own. The doorbell rang, and John's father opened the door to let in Katie Evans, who was wearing a plain yellow shirt and black form-fitting pants. Her red hair was in a tight bun.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Hey, John!" Miss Evans smiled. "You ready to have fun tonight?" She turned to John's dad. "Don't worry, Rob, I'll make sure your son doesn't get into any trouble."

"You promise you'll take good care of him tonight?"

It may have been a trick of Ehilend's moonlight, but Robert Jones thought he saw a tear roll down his neighbor's cheek. "I promise," she said.

Caroline looked into her son's eyes. "We'll be here when you wake up, sweetie. Hey, John, don't cry. It's just one night. Miss Evans will take good care of you and you'll have a lot of fun." John stared at her, and she kissed his nose. "Bye, sweetie."

"Bye John," Robert said. "Be good," he added with a smile. Miss Evans went to stand next to John and she put a hand on his shoulder. John waved good-bye to his parents. He watched from the window as they walked, hand in hand, towards the family car. His dad honked its horn and they waved to their son. John waved back to them until the darkness swallowed up the headlights of their car.

Unbeknownst to him, he would never see his parents ever again.

As soon as his parents were out of sight, his caretaker collapsed in an armchair and started crying her eyes out. John rushed to her aid. "What's wrong, Miss Evans?" he asked. She tried her best to smile back at him, but he knew she was upset about something.

"It's nothing, John," she answered. She stood up and walked to the kitchen. "What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"Mom and Dad never let me choose!" John said as he bounded towards her. He was excited. "I really like the noodles that are all curly and have tomato sauce on them."

Miss Evans looked down at him. "Spaghetti? Sure. I can do that. What else do you want?"

John pointed to some cabinets. "Do you think we could have some brownies too?"

To his surprise, Miss Evans smiled and grabbed some of the brownie mix. "Tonight, you can have all the brownies you want. Do you want to watch anything special on TV? Or maybe you want to go play with some toys?"

The young boy walked over to the couch, crawled onto it, and sat down. He turned on the viewscreen and surfed the channels until he found a program he enjoyed.

Miss Evans let John watch the movie while he ate dinner. He thanked her profusely. She went straight to making brownies for him after she delivered him his meal, even though she seemed interested in the movie. It was an action-packed comedy, and was rated T. His parents only let him watch G-rated movies. When his caretaker was done with the brownies and had let John eat his fill, she took out her Chatter and called someone. She stepped out onto the patio before John could figure out who it was she was calling. Even so, he didn't care. His parents said they would be gone for around four hours. The movie lasted around two and a half. After it was over, he went upstairs and played with some of his action figures until Miss Evans came upstairs and told him it was time for him to go to bed. When John asked if he had to take a bath, she shook her head. "No," she replied, "not tonight. But if you stay up too late you won't be ready for school tomorrow morning." John took note of this and decided to follow Miss Evan's advice and get washed up. He put on his pajamas, said his prayers, and went downstairs to say goodnight to his caretaker. He found her, once again, stricken with tears.

"Are you okay, Miss Evans?" He was greeted with the sound of her blowing her nose.

"I'm alright, John. Good night."

"Good night," John responded. He went back into his room, switched off the lights, and crawled under the covers. He took one last look at the moon and the stars. Then, he turned around and drifted off almost instantly to sleep.

Kate Evans checked on young John Jones about forty-five minutes before his parents were supposed to come home. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, then walked downstairs and opened the front door. Across the street with a streetlight illuminating its glow on it was a cerulean car. She gave a thumbs-up to the man sitting in the driver's seat of the car, and he walked out of it and into the house. Draped over his shoulder was a black and grey duffle bag. "You need to be quick, Andy," Katie said to her fellow former ORION. Andrew Norren saw her blink back tears.

"I don't like this either, Katie, but it has to be done." He walked up the stairs and took a syringe from his pocket. It was

filled with silver liquid. Also in his pocket was a syringe with maroon-colored liquid, and he would need them both soon. He carefully opened the door to the room containing a sleeping John Jones. It barely made a sound. He tiptoed over to the young boy and breathed deeply before pulling down the covers a little so the boy's neck was exposed. Andy Norren then stabbed the six-year-old in the neck with the syringe, putting him into a coma. He wouldn't awaken until an antidote was applied. The boy made only the slightest of groans as the anesthetics traversed his bloodstream. Norren put the bag down and unzipped it, revealing the same boy that was in the bed. It was a flash clone, grown from DNA samples of the child in an ONI laboratory on Mars. It was an exact likeness of the child, with the same memories as he did from only two weeks ago. The one thing it didn't have was the lifespan: the clone would get sick and die within two or three months. All of the clones were programmed with a different disease: Norren believed that this particular clone was implanted with a deadly strain of pneumonia: the temperature drops a little and BAM, the 'child' dies. He took the body of John and laid it gently on the ground. Then, he scooped up the clone and put it underneath the covers. He focused on the real boy and put his still, nearly lifeless body in the duffel bag, zipping it nearly all the way up. He then took the syringe with the maroon-colored liquid in it and stabbed it into the clone's neck, putting him into a stupor that functioned exactly like sleep. In the morning, the clone would wake up, and live its life just as little John would until its expiry sometime before the end of the year. It was a horrible thing to do, and he didn't want to do it, but he was told that everyone who refused to participate in these abductions were dead men walking. Norren had a wife and children to take care of. He didn't want them to suffer through his death like the Jones' would suffer through 'John's'.

He walked carefully down the stairs with the duffel bag swung over his shoulder. He noticed a teary-eyed Kate Evans sitting in an armchair and nodded to her. She nodded back. As he opened the door, he said in a blatantly loud voice, "Alright, Kate. See ya at work tomorrow!" He closed the door and jogged across the street. He opened his car's trunk and put the bag inside of it with as much care as he could muster. He closed the trunk, started the car and drove towards the Luxor Spaceport.

Upon Norren's arrival at the spaceport, he parked by a security station positioned next to the road leading to the main complex. He handed one of the officers his Marine ID.

"Sergeant Norren?" said one of the officers. "There's a Pelican all set for your departure. It's docked in the private landing zone-take Zemena Road, and drive for two miles until you see the gates."

Andrew Norren smiled at the officer. "Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I knew not everyone from this planet was an Innie." He drove in the direction the officer had pointed him until he saw the complex she had been referring to. The Pelican was the only craft there, and, in the light coming from light poles that illuminated the ship, he could make out his fellow ORIONS Avery Johnson and Nolan Byrne. They appeared to be arguing with each other, as there was a lot of finger-jabbing. Norren parked his car next to them and rolled down the window. "Are you two quite done yet?" he said in an exhausted tone. He wanted this godforsaken mission over with as fast as

possible. His comrades stared furiously at him. "Just get the damn package," Norren said. He got out and stood by the Pelican. "I trust nobody else got to touch this craft?"

"No, sir," Byrne replied in a thick Irish accent. "I'll fly it, Andy. I wouldn't trust Johnson here with piloting this heap of junk."

"Your mother's a heap of junk," Johnson grumbled as Byrne walked into the cockpit of the craft. Fortunately, the latter hadn't heard him, but Norren did, and he shot a fuming glare at Johnson. The dark-skinned man only dropped the bag he had been carrying onto the bay floor. The ramp closed a few seconds later. "So, was that car a rental? Or are you just going to leave it there?" Johnson asked. Norren put his face in his hands. He didn't care about the car, or why Johnson and Byrne were fighting when they had been so calm on the ride to the spaceport.

All he cared about, right then and there, was a poor little boy who would never go to high school, never go to college, never get a well-paying job, never go to prom or get married or have kids or buy a car or a house or have a pet or _be a kid_ or _have a life_—

Right then and there, the only thing he worried about was the fate of John Jones. No, not John Jones. John Jones would die by the end of the year.

He worried about _John-117_, and all the other SPARTAN-IIs who would sacrifice their livelihoods for the rest of humanity.

The Pelican broke orbit, flying towards a UNSC frigate just inside the asteroid belt. If the Insurrectionists there knew about it, they didn't care. The Pelican docked without any altercation, and the frigate jumped into Slipspace towards the planet Reach.

4. Welcome to Reach

****September 23, 2517****

****Military Reservation 01478-B, Reach****

The sun was beginning to set, so that it appeared to be a fiery orange color. Franklin Mendez stood at the bottom of the steps leading into the main complex. In the distance, he could see fifteen miniscule shapes growing steadily larger: fifteen Pelicans loaded with the SPARTANS that he would hone into the perfect soldiers. He walked back up the stairs, opened the door, saluted to the marines and ONI personnel there, and strolled into the amphitheater, where Halsey and Dã©jã were waiting for him. The former was dressed in her lab coat, with a black top and pants; the latter looked the same as always. Mendez himself wore his formal white military suit, pinned with over a dozen medals. He wore his formal hat as any soldier would. He was glad to be inside the structure, as it was a hot, muggy evening outside. The woman nodded at him, and the AI did so as well. He stepped onto the dais next to them and returned the gesture. He remained perfectly still, with his hands clasped behind his back, as Dã©jã began conversing with the doctor.

"Doctor Halsey, have you read my psychological evaluations?" she inquired.

"I have. They were quite thorough, thank you."

The AI remained silent for a few seconds. "Andâ€|?" she finally asked, moving her right hand in a circular motion, expecting Halsey to tell her more.

"I have decided to ignore them. Any fabrication we tell them might give them cause to rebel if they discover the truth, which is why I'm going to tell them it now," Halsey responded.

"Good move," Mendez murmured. He was close enough to the woman so that he could nudge her with his shoulder, which he did. Halsey's gaze settled on the entrance to the amphitheater, where a throng of children began walking nervously into the room. Each one was escorted by a trainer; these men and women were mostly comprised of ORION soldiers-SPARTAN-Is, as Halsey called them. The soldiers pushed all seventy-five children into the room. They were of varying ethnicities, and nearly all of them had been crying recently. Both Halsey and Mendez felt pangs of regret for what they had done to the kids: the oldest children there were only two months shy of their seventh birthday; the youngest had yet to reach their sixth. They couldn't comprehend what had happened to them. They had no idea that they had been kidnapped from their homes and rushed to Reach, where they would, under ideal conditions, spend the next ten years training before being sent into the galaxy with the sole purpose of killing terrorists. Nobody could comfort them, but Halsey tried her best.

As soon as they had all been forcefully seated by the trainers who sat next to them, she began her speech. "I am Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. As per Naval Code 45812, you are hereby conscripted into the UNSC Special Project codenamed SPARTAN-II. You have been called upon to serve." At this, a handful of the children sat up, interested by her speech. "You will be trained," Halsey continued, "and you will become the best we can make of you." Halsey sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Then, she looked at the children with a commanding gleam in her eyes.

"You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies."

Catherine Halsey felt disgusted by the drivel pouring out of her mouth. "This will be hard to understand, but you cannot go back to your parents." '_Yes, we are your parents now. Me, the man to my right, the AI to my left. None of us will ever stop feeling guilty for this_', she thought. She had to hold back the urge to help the children who squirmed in their seats. A few of them almost resumed crying. "This place will become your home," she said in a louder tone. "Your fellow trainees will be your family now. The training will be difficult, but you may rest now. We begin tomorrow." She motioned to her left. "This is DÃ©jÃ , an AI. To my right is Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez. He will escort you to your barracks."

Mendez cleared his throat and walked somewhat menacingly towards the trainees. "Alright trainees, fall out!" he shouted. At this command, the trainers each got to their feet and escorted the young children out the door in an orderly line. Mendez started to follow them, but

Halsey called him back.

"Chief," she said. "Keep them busy tomorrow. Make sure they don't think about what we've done to them." The man nodded stoically and followed the young trainees out the door. When he closed it behind him, DÃ©jÃ offered a small, sad smile to Halsey, and then her image flickered and faded, and Halsey was left alone in the amphitheater.

****September 24, 2517****

****Military Reservation 01478-B, Reach****

John hadn't slept well at all. He kept thinking about his parents, and Parisa, and Emile, and all his other friends. Did they realize what had happened to him? Did they know where he was? When he woke up, it was on an uncomfortable cot. He was dimly aware of someone standing above him, and of people mulling about, but he didn't care. He nestled himself into the covers.

And then he felt a shock of electricity course throughout his body, stunning him into full consciousness. "I said up, boot! Are you deaf or just stupid?" yelled a man in a rough voice. John saw a six-foot man with thin black hair standing above his cot. He recognized the man as the one from last night: Franklin Mendez. He was in a military uniform, and they were both in a room about ten yards wide but five times that in length. Propped against the walls were cots identical to John's, and children were waking up-sometimes due to shocking-in all of them. Mendez waited until all the children were thoroughly scared witless, and then pointed to a thin glass door at the far end of the room. "Showers are aft, cadets. You will wash up, and then return here to dress." He pulled a small trunk from under one boy's cot and opened it, showing the contents off to all the children. It contained one grey sweatshirt, dark green shorts, thick socks, boxers and underwear. There was a name stenciled to the left side of the chest: Michael-120. On the right side was a picture of a bird gripping arrows in one talon and a lightning bolt in the other, with a star above the image. After John had finished showering, he opened his own chest under the watchful eye of a trainer and learned his new name: John-117.

John was one of the first children outside. The sun had not yet risen, and the grassy field they met Mendez on was covered with dew. A few trainers were prowling about, but other than them it was just Mendez and the kids. John noticed that the building he had slept in was one of multiple building in the area. A wide fence could be barely seen in the distance. There were other, larger buildings in the compound as well. Floodlights blanketed the field.

"Alright, you're all here? Good," Mendez said at the top of his lungs. "Five rows of fifteen!" With some hesitation, the children managed to achieve that. "Jumping jacks!" Mendez cried as soon as the kids were ordered. He did one, and then the children followed his example. Anyone who stopped was shocked by a stun baton. Mendez stopped when each child had done a hundred. "Good!" he said again. "Sit-ups, one hundred again! Anyone who quits runs around the compound twice!" Nobody wanted to do that, so they all complied. Push-ups and squats followed. John threw up, as did most of the other kids, but they kept powering through the exercise like machines in fear of the batons. Mendez eventually had water bottles wheeled over

to the trainees, which they accepted graciously. He then led them towards the big marble building they had been in yesterday. John ogled at the men and women in armed forces regalia standing guard at the entrance to the building. Mendez and the trainers herded the children into the amphitheater, and on the dais stood the holographic full-sized woman in flowing robes from the night before.

"Hello, children," she said in a silky voice. "In case you've forgotten, I am DÃ©jÃ . You are just in time for class." When the AI was met with a cacophony of groans, she replied, "Of course, if you want to miss out on the lesson, you may always resume your morning calisthenics." That got the children scrambling to find seats. A few of the children tried socializing with each other, but their teacher hushed them up by activating a sprawling 3-D holographic map on the ground. It contained a bay easily a dozen feet wide and twenty feet wide, along with three-foot tall mountains practically on the waterfront. Indeed, one narrow stretch of land was only a few inches wide. The AI let the children explore the map for a short time, and then an army appeared, dressed in chest armor and sandals, with large helmets. They carried spears and daggers, and were situated at the narrow point near the bay. A much larger army was advancing down a riverside towards their position, similarly armed but dressed differently. "A Grecian army," DÃ©jÃ said, pointing to the smaller group, "of seven thousand soldiers, led by the Spartan king Leonidas." She pointed to the larger advancing group. "A Persian army led by Persian king Xerxes I. The Persians were attempting to take over Greece, but the Grecians would have none of it. The war had been waging for years already when, in 480 BCE, Xerxes aimed to take control of the land of Boeotia. The only way to get there was a narrow pass known as Thermopylae." The children watched in awe as a massive group of Persians left the main force to attack the Greeks. There was a massive brawl when they reached them, but, in the end, the Greeks were victorious. "Xerxes sent in multiple waves of ten thousand troops in an effort to dislodge the Greeks. Each one was completely slaughtered, and the Greeks lost only a few hundred men with each bout." The cycle repeated again, but the outcome was just as DÃ©jÃ had said it would be. "For two days, they defended that pass. On the third day, thanks to a traitorous Greek townsman, the Persians discovered a path that led right to the Greek army. The Spartan king Leonidas sent most of his soldiers away while he, 300 of his fellow Spartans, and a thousand other soldiers covered them. 400 of this rear guard soon surrendered to the final Persian force of ten thousand, but the remaining troops fought to the death." The children watched as the smaller Greek force was overwhelmed and defeated, with their leader Leonidas eventually beheaded and crucified.

"The Greek force of seven thousand suffered four thousand casualties. The Persian force of one hundred thousand suffered more than twenty thousand losses. Up until yesterday, the Spartans of Greece were considered to be the finest warriors ever seen." She smiled in an almost wicked fashion at the young children exploring the map and watching the battle.

"That's where you come in."

A few hours later, the children were released from DÃ©jÃ 's care and ran carefree out of the marble building and right into the waiting arms of Franklin Mendez. He was accompanied by two dozen trainers, and stared menacingly at them. "Alright, kiddies, time for the playground!" The children were overjoyed, as they desperately wanted

time to themselves. "It's only a short run. Fall in!" Mendez ordered.

"Two miles?" one girl next to John panted. Her shirt read Sharon-145. "That's a 'short run?'" John only shrugged and fell to the ground. The sun was past its zenith, and the kids had been running for over half an hour. Mendez was barely breathing heavy. The playground was like nothing the children had expected: dozens of twenty-meter tall poles made out of tough wood, complemented by cargo nets and wooden bridges that swayed in the wind. Ropes and incredibly sturdy metal baskets were attached to a few of the poles. John thought it was akin to a military training course, and only later did he realize that that was exactly what it was.

"Trainees, form three lines!" The children burst into place, forming three equal lines in less than half a minute. "The first person in each line will be team one, the second will be team two, and so on. Today, you will try to ring the bell located on the tallest pole." Indeed, there was a brass bell attached to a thirty-meter pole, the tallest in the arena. "The last team to ring the bell and report back to me will forfeit dinner. Tomorrow, we will repeat the exercise with the same teams, and whoever got last today had better hope they don't end up last tomorrow. Any questions?" There were none. "Then meet with your teams and get in front of me!" The children double-timed into twenty-five teams. John's team was composed of himself, a boy with sandy blond hair and a girl with coarse brown hair.

"I'm Sam," the boy replied. His shirt read Samuel-034.

"Kelly," the girl said. Her shirt had the words Kelly-087 on them.

John said nothing, and when Mendez shouted, "Go!" he burst towards the arena. He didn't care much about his team. They needed to prove themselves before he would work with them. He ambled up a cargo net, pushing his way past another boy and sending the cadet into a pool of shallow water below it. He jogged across a wooden bridge and jumped onto a wooden platform connected to a pole, leaping on top of subsequent ones, each at a slightly higher elevation and distance, as they wound around it. At the highest one, there was a rope swing. He jumped onto it and managed to land on a platform. Sharon, the girl from earlier, was swinging across, but John pushed her back, causing her to topple over forty feet onto a pile of cushions. She'd be fine. John climbed up another pole using a rope, and leaped onto a cargo net attached to yet another one, clambering his way up to a platform. Breathing in heavy gasps from the exertion, he leapt clumsily onto another platform, falling face first. He got up and turned around to see a boy and two girls close behind. There was a basket attached to the pole, and John got into it, using the rope to hoist himself up. It was tiring work, and the kids behind him got in another basket and started doing the same thing. They were overtaking him! John pulled faster, and he got to the top of the pole seconds before they did. It was the pole with the bell on it! John rang the bell and slid down a thin metal pole to the bottom, where he fell onto solid turf. He got up as fast as he could and dashed towards Mendez.

"I was first," he said with a smile. Mendez nodded, a blatantly displeased expression on his face, and made a mark with his finger on the tablet he was holding. Either by themselves or in small groups, the other trainees made their way to Mendez's position. John watched

as his two team members Kelly and Sam finished dead last. They were nowhere near as good as he had hoped they would be. Maybe if he had some of his friends from Eridanus with him

"Alright, good work today, people. Let's get back to the barracks and chow down. Except for 034, 117 and 087. Your team finished last today, so you don't get dinner. Better luck tomorrow."

"But I was first!" John cried, dismayed. Mendez narrowed his eyes and glared at him.

"But your team came in last, and that's all that matters in this program."

****September 25, 2517****

****Military Reservation 01478-B, Reach****

"The grey wolf of Earth," Dã@jã said, "is a deadly predator." A holographic image appeared: four large quadrupeds grazing on moss in a forest. They were about as tall as each child's legs, and the trees were only seven or eight feet tall. A few trainees cried out in shock as they saw swift grey canines running stealthily through the undergrowth, keeping vigilant watch on the oblivious grazing animals. "Individually, one would be no match for a moose, four of which are portrayed here, but, as a pack, wolves are exceptional hunters. They stalk their prey, and hound it until they can overpower it." As the children watched, two of the wolves burst from the trees at the moose, snarling. The herbivores ran in the opposite direction out onto an open plain, and some of the kids bounded after them. The two wolves chasing them were joined by a third, while two more ran up to the moose from the sides. Three of the herbivores managed to get away, but the one in the rear was leapt upon by one of the carnivores, who was quickly joined by another. One of the wolves walked up in front of the moose, but the herbivore swung its antlers at it. The antlers never met their target, though, because another wolf leapt at the moose's neck and caused its swing to go wild. The wolves brought the moose down by constantly biting and leaping on top of it.

John watched with intensity as the wolves store apart their prey. "Notice how each wolf helped the others, either by flanking or chasing their targets. They attacked, and one even defended another from the moose," his instructor told her class. She gazed with unfeeling eyes at the young boy as she uttered a statement he would never forget: "For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack."

The children were once again clumped in groups of three later that afternoon. It had taken them an average of twelve seconds less to run the two miles from the main building of the 2-by-1 mile complex, which Mendez was proud of. "Even slight improvement is still improvement, Spartans," he had told them. "And I expect the same to be true of those among you who didn't do too well on the exercise yesterday." The course looked much more difficult: the walkways, nets and platforms were in new locations, and the bell pole was a good five meters taller than the previous day. It would be a daunting task.

In John's team, Sam shoved him while Mendez was talking. "You'd

better help us," he hissed, "or I'll push you off a platform."

"And I'll jump after you and land on your neck," Kelly added.

John grimaced. "Fine," he said. "But we have to be quick about it. We are not losing again." This time, when Mendez gave the order to start, he and his team ran faster than they had ever run before. Kelly bounded across the field like a rabbit, jumping over logs and leaping onto walkways; she was easily the fastest Spartan in the entire group. Sam and John fell in behind her. While they were clambering up a cargo net, John got his foot stuck, but Sam was there to help him out. "Thanks," he breathed. Sam nodded, and the two followed their teammate past more platforms and rope-swings. There were kids ahead of them, but they tried their best to not give any ground. Kelly managed to make it across the poles and over to a basket underneath the bell pole. She wasn't the first one there, though. Other teams had gone up, and one boy got to her before John and Sam.

"Move over," he said, but Kelly pushed him towards John, who elbowed him and sent him sprawling towards the edge of the walkway, which the trainee was soon grasping onto with only his right hand. John walked over and contemplated squishing the boy's hand so he would fall. It was easily a seventy foot drop and, even with the mass of cushions beneath him, the boy might get hurt. He wasn't on the same team as John, but the tall, dark-skinned boy, Benjamin-073, was still a fellow Spartan. John let him hang and ran over to Kelly and Sam. Glancing back, he saw the other two boys on Benjamin's team help him up. Kelly, Sam and John ignored them and concentrated on hoisting the basket up using a pulley. It was tiring work, but they eventually managed to get to the bell and ring it. They let the basket drop as they walked out of it and to the fire pole, where they slid down. They ran over to Mendez, who let out a slow whistle.

"From last place to third? I'm impressed, cadets. That was some good teamwork out there!"

"Thank you, Chief!" John said. He saluted, and the other members of his team did likewise. Mendez shooed them over to the other Spartans who had finished the exercise.

"Good job, guys!" Sam said, clapping his teammate's backs. "Y'know, weâ€|we can be friends, if you want."

"Sure!" Kelly replied cheerfully.

"Okay," John responded with a smile on his face. "Friends." _'I'm going to like it here,'_ he thought.

****December 11, 2517****

****Elysium City, Eridanus II****

There was stillness in the air punctuated by the torrid sounds of anguish. It was a dark, cloudy afternoon, and a little boy had died. His mother and father walked behind the pallbearers as they carried the tiny casket towards its final resting place. "He was so young," the mother cried in between loud sobs. "He didn'tâ€|heâ€|" She resumed her wailing tears.

"I know sweetie, I know," the father told his wife. His face was grave, his eyes red and puffy from crying.

Behind the parents, a tall dark-skinned young man walked. He dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief, and then blew his nose on it. Pacing beside the casket was a little girl dressed entirely in black. "He promised," she said, disbelief creeping into her anguished voice. "He _promised_!"

That day, a gravestone was erected: John Jones,
07.03.2511-07.12.2517.

That was not his grave, but he was welcome in it. In any case, John Jones was dead.

John-117, on the other hand, was doing just fine.

5. This Spartan life

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****July 12, 2519****

****Military Wilderness Training Preserve, Reach****

The sun was just rising, giving the snowy peaks of the Highland Mountains a glistening shine. John and his seventy-four brothers and sisters gazed in awe as the D96-TCE Albatross they were inside passed over them. The Highlands were a majestic sight: Meleg, Bretter's Slant, Pryor, Menachite, and a few dozen others. They had always seen the mountains looming in the distance, and the Spartans were always excited to see them up close. They dominated the landscape, jutting high and unopposed for many miles into the crisp morning sky. Far below was the lush Longhorn Valley, which stretched for a vast distance and was dissected by the curved form of the Big Horn River. The Spartans had performed many matches of war games within the valley: capture the flag, escort missions, big team battles, search and destroy ops. But Mendez had told his troops that today would be a different mission entirely today, and the young Spartans were eager to find out what he had in store for them.

It was also the Spartan Jerome-092's birthday, but the new eight-year-old didn't realize that. Only a handful of the Spartans still remembered much about their lives before they were conscripted, and only Daisy-023 still remembered her birthday. To them, the thrill of combat and the wealth of knowledge were supplemental in a way love and devotion from family or friends could never be. Truly, they were children no more: they were SPARTAN-IIs through and through.

Mendez stepped out of the Albatross's cockpit and watched as his Spartans stared in awe at the beautiful mountain range. He whistled, and they stood perfectly straight and saluted him. He was carrying a stack of papers, and, after saying, "At ease, soldiers," he handed them to Penny-119. "Hand out one sheet to each Spartan," he told her.

"Yes, sir!" the auburn-haired girl replied, saluting. She took the

papers from her instructor and began delivering one to each of the Spartans, saving the last sheet for herself. When each trainee had received a piece, they looked intensely at it: some pieces had large swaths of blue, others were predominantly green. They all featured a compass complete with the cardinal directions etched onto them.

"These are portions of maps of the Longhorn Valley," Mendez explained. "You will navigate to a marked extraction point that is located on only one person's map. A different Albatross will be waiting for you there. Oh, and one last thing," Mendez said with a malicious grin. "The last one to make it to the extraction point will be left behind. And it's a long way back." The Spartans began murmuring to each other, confused and shocked. They were only at it for a few seconds before Mendez whistled again. "Stow it, trainees. 002, you're up first. We're landing in two minutes."

After he had been dropped off, John had managed to quickly find the Big Horn River, and trekked alongside it. He was wearing his everyday combat fatigues but also had a moderately thick parka on, so the chilly wind didn't bother him too much. He sat by the bank of the river, taking a handful of berries from a nearby plant and looking at them. They were blueberries. Chief Mendez would kill for some of these. He gorged himself on the little indigo fruits as he reflected on his short life. He remembered only a few scant things from his life before conscription, and, even though he tried to recollect further, he had an epiphany: he didn't want to. This was an exciting life. Already, he was learning trigonometry and history. He could dress a wound, string a tripwire, fire a rifle and do hundreds of other important military tasks. He loved his life on Reach. He also loved his brothers and sisters, two of which stepped out of the undergrowth nearby.

"John!" one of them called. John looked at the boy.

"Anton! Good to see you guys. Where are the others?"

"A lot of us are gathered by the lake," the other Spartan said. "Anton and I were a team sent to find the stragglers." She motioned towards the woods. "Here, follow us!"

"You go with Valeria," Anton ordered. "I'll go look for more stragglers-you know I'm one of the best trackers. I'll find them in no time." He ran towards the river, and John followed Valeria into the forest. After a few minutes, Valeria stopped and whistled a catchy six-note tune. She and John waited a bit before an answering whistle came from up above. John looked up and stepped back in time for a Spartan to land just in front of him.

"Glad you could make it," Fhajad-084 said. "Did you find anyone else, Valeria? Where's Anton?"

"He went to gather up anyone else who might still be out there," the girl responded. She walked past the tree Fhajad had been sitting in and into a little clearing. In it were well over five dozen Spartans, either chatting to each other or looking over a jumble of papers on the ground. Some were pieced together in a definite shape, and a few others were discarded. "What's going on now?"

"We're trying to piece together the map," Fhajad responded. "Lots of

the map pieces are duplicates, apparently." He led the other two over to the group with the paper in front of them. "You guys figure it out yet?"

Fred-104, the Spartan sitting in front of the map, shook his head. "No such luck. We found out where we are, but we can't find an extraction point."

John crouched in front of the map. He looked over the map pieces, and then noticed something on one of them. "Is this where we are?" he asked Fred, pointing to a bright green spot on a map. It seemed to be a clearing covered in grass. Fred frowned.

"No, this clearing is a lot smaller. We're over--"

"Then that's where we need to head," John said, getting up. "Everyone!" he called. "I found the extrac--"

"We don't know that's the extraction point," Fred argued. "It's not even marked." Then, another Spartan bent down and shook his head.

"No, John's right. Why didn't we see it before?" Tony-041 said. "That place is the only area large enough for an Albatross to land in." John smiled smugly at his accomplishment.

"Okay, everyone!" John called. "The extraction point is north of here." he turned to Tony. "How many Spartans are here?"

"With Anton and the other search party gone? Sixty-seven," Tony replied after thinking it over for a bit.

John gathered the Spartans over to him. "I need ten of you to stay here and wait for Anton to gather up the others. The rest of us will head towards this location," he told them as he pointed to the probable landing zone on the large map. "It's a day's walk away, but it's also directly north of here. We'll stop after about six hours and wait for you all to regroup with us. Understand?" There was a resounding chorus of affirmative replies. John selected the ten Spartans closest to him. "Vishan, Jennifer, Mike, Carris, Tim, Serin, Beth, Bianca, Malcolm, Isaac. You guys stay here and wait. The rest of you, form up on me." He started walking north, and the other Spartans followed suit. After a while, he turned to Sam. "Sam, you've got good eyes and ears. Walk ahead a bit and scout out the area to make sure there aren't any surprises up ahead." Sam nodded and dashed off.

After about six hours, the Spartans found themselves by a small pond. Sam had returned to them half an hour earlier to report that the path ahead was devoid of traps. "Nothing but moas," he told John. When they reached the pond, they stopped marching and relaxed. Some of them calmly munched on berries, while others just laid back and rested their eyes. There was nervous chatter among the children.

"Who's going to be left behind?" Fhajad asked. He was sitting in a group with Sam, Kelly, John, Tony and Valeria.

"Maybe we couldâ€¦draw straws?" Valeria suggested. John shook his head.

"No one is getting left behind. There must be some way we can get everyone to the base at the same time."

At that moment, Anton walked into the area, followed by the remaining Spartans. "Alright, guys, where is this mystical evac zone we're heading to?" He walked over to John, who showed him the map.

"Now that we've got all the Spartans here, we'll wait for a bit and let your team recuperate, and then we'll head off." John motioned to a tree. "Go. Sit. We leave in fifteen minutes."

It was dusk by the time John took out the map and motioned for everyone to halt. "Look here-this little tributary? It's that," he told those nearest to him. He was pointing to a small creek on the side of the path they were using. The tributary also happened to be less than a kilometer away from the evac zone. "We're getting close. Sam! You and I will go check it out. Everyone else, stay here." He took his friend away from the main group and headed north towards the field.

They crawled on their bellies when the field came into view so they could avoid detection. They saw an Albatross dropship as Chief Mendez had said, with its headlights illuminating a section of forest to the west. Four men and two women were lounging around at the rear end of the ship. Two were smoking cigarettes, and three others were playing cards. The final man was reading on a tablet. John and Sam could hear them talking even from their position. "When are those kids going to get here?" one woman asked.

"Not sure," the man next to her replied, shrugging. "At least a dozen of them should be here by now." He took a sip of some unidentifiable liquid. "All I hope is that they don't put up too much of a fight."

"That's all I needed to hear," John whispered. He tapped Sam on the shoulder and the two slunk back into the woods. They met with the other Spartans to discuss what to do next.

"Alright, listen up!" John ordered. "There are six trainers out there in an Albatross. They might prove to be hostile, though. Kelly, you're our fastest runner. Get out there and make them notice you. The rest of us will be waiting in the undergrowth, ready to assist you. Got it?" Kelly nodded and began stretching her legs. She then burst from the woods into the clearing.

"Hey! Is this the extraction point?" The people by the Albatross started whispering excitedly and pointing to Kelly. One of them walked over to her. Nothing seemed to be amiss.

"Yes it is, trainee. You're in luck: you happen to be the first one here. Good job!"

"Thanks, sir," Kelly said. She followed the man as he led her back to the Albatross, motioning for the other trainers to get away from the boarding ramp. Inside, he waved his arm. "Choose whichever seat you wish," he told her. Kelly sat right next to the entrance to the cockpit and buckled up. The trainer knelt down next to her and took off his army-standard backpack.

"What are you doing?" Kelly asked. She was answered by a stun baton right to her neck. She cried out in shock and pain as the volts coursed through her small body, and slipped into unconsciousness.

Of course, from the perspective of the other Spartans, they only saw a flash of blue light and heard the cry of pain coming from their sister. A few of them, John included, got up and were preparing to run towards the dropship when they heard a voice. "Not yet!" came the voice of Tony-041. He grabbed a large, blunt rock off the ground. It was heavy, and he struggled to hold it. "We might...urghâ€¦need this. And we definitely need other weapons."

John grabbed two long sticks from the ground and looked at them. "Two sticks, and a rock for the whole platoon?" Sam just shrugged.

The men and women near the albatross continued to act as if Kelly had never been captured. They were completely unprepared when, without any warning, seventy-four children burst out of the woods. Most of them were armed with sticks or stones, and two of them were using a very large rock as a battering ram. The trainers instinctively ran away from the Spartans carrying the rock, and right into the arms of the other ones. A few of the trainers and kids clashed before one of the Spartans screamed "ENOUGH!" The combatants looked towards Kurt-051. He was carrying Kelly's limp form. "Why did you stun her?" he calmly asked the trainers.

"Weâ€¦we needed to make sure one of you was left behind, and we didn't want anyone trying to make sure everyone evacuated," one of the trainers said. She was nursing a bruised shoulder.

"We have your vessel," John said. "Spartans, get onboard. As for you sixâ€¦" he said, taking a step towards them. They stepped back in fear, but Kurt cleared his throat loudly and stared with malice towards John, so John simply removed his parka and handed it to one of them. Around twenty other Spartans did the same thing.

Kurt handed Kelly to two other Spartans and walked over to the trainers. "Do you have radios?" he asked. One of them gulped and nodded. "Good," Kurt continued. He motioned to the ground. "Use these sticks to build a fire and call the base for extraction. They should be here before dawn. He walked next to John and into the ship.

"Do you know how to fly this?" John asked. Kurt shook his head.

"No, but I know who does. Mike!" he called. Mike-120 walked over to them.

"What do you need me for?" the boy asked.

"You can pilot this ship, right?"

Mike smiled. "Albatrosses, Pelicans, Longswordsâ€¦shame they haven't let me have a go at a frigate yet."

"That's cuz you'd crash it!" a black-haired girl sitting nearby called. Mike rolled his eyes. "Just ignore Adriana," he said. "It works wonders for me." He walked into the cockpit of the dropship. It lifted off the ground a minute later, and headed directly towards the Spartan's main base of operations at the military reserve.

****July 13, 2519****

****Military Reservation 01478-B, Reach****

Despite the fan, sweat trickled down John's neck. He was standing in front of a desk in Chief Mendez's private office. No other Spartan had been in here before. It was in its own little building, made of dark wood paneling. It smelled strongly of cigar smoke. Sitting in a chair behind the desk was the Chief himself, reading a report on his tablet. He took a sip of blueberry juice. "Tell me, 117, why you saw fit to lead an operation to steal the Albatross at the extraction point," Mendez inquired. "Leading the Spartans through the woods, figuring out where the extraction zone was; those are commendable things. But stealing UNSC property? You'd better have a damn good reason, trainee." John gulped and licked his lips. He was about to respond when the door slip upwards and Doctor Catherine Halsey walked in.

"Doctor Halsey, ma'am," John said, saluting. The doctor smiled at him and crossed her arms. "John," she said, slightly nodding her head. Mendez coughed, which brought the young Spartan back to the reality of the situation.

"I'm waiting, soldier," Mendez said.

"Sir, Iâ€¦I didn't want anyone to be left behind. I didn't want anyone to have to trek over the mountains."

Mendez sighed and wrote something down on his tablet. "The trainers you left in the woods are fine, by the way. Not like you asked. 051 did." John gulped and nodded. He was sweating even more profusely.

"117, what do we do with you?" Mendez asked. "You performed admirably-you almost always do-but you show consistently more regard for your teammates than the mission at hand. I'm not sure whether that's good or bad!" He turned towards Doctor Halsey and threw his hands up in exasperation. "Doctor, what the hell do we do with this kid?"

"Do?" Halsey put her hands on her hips. "I think that's obvious, Chief. We give the Spartans something they've been sorely lacking.

We make him squad leader."

****June 1, 2524****

****Military Wilderness Training Preserve, Reach****

The woods were alive with the sound of gunfire. It was one of the Chief's training missions: a 25 vs 25 vs 25 VIP match. John was the leader and VIP of Blue Team, while Fred was the VIP of Red Team and Kurt was the VIP of Green Team. The goal of the mission was to capture the enemy leaders, and to hide your own team leader. The Spartans had been given access to a wide array of vehicles and weapons: Warthogs, Mongooses, and any UNSC weapon Mendez could muster. All the 'rounds' were laser sights: if someone 'shot' you, lights on your modified combat vest would turn red, and the Spartan who was 'killed' would have to sit down and wait for the exercise to

end. This particular match had been going on for over an hour, or at least that's what John assumed. He was walking quietly through the woods. Directly to his left was Kayla-025, and to his left were Joshua-029 and Adriana-111. The other three Spartans were constantly scanning the trees, making sure no one was following them. A squawking sound coming from John's hand-held comm device made them stop. "Blue One," the voice said. "This is Blue Fourteen, do you copy?"

John whispered into the device. "Loud and clear, Randall."

"Some of Green team took out Red Leader. Blue Six and I are at the base ofâ€|oh, wait." There was loud gunfire coming from the southeast, and it was close. Joshua and Kayla leveled their rifles in that direction, while John and Adriana burst to the north. "Blue One, this is Blue Fourteen!" came the voice again. The sounds of battle were still crisp; Randall had to be close to their position. "They took out Jorge! At least half a dozen of them, heading towards the big curve in the riv-" Randall's voice was cut short with a burst of what sounded like battle rifle fire.

"John, _move_!" Adriana cried in her Slavic accent. "I'll stay here and cover you! Head away from the river!"

"Don't _cover _me," John told her. "Just go, run! I'll be fine!" he sprinted through the trees, headed towards some distant hills. He didn't look back to find out what happened to his soldiers. Eventually, he found himself on a mound of rocks, a mile away from the river. He was panting heavily, and plopped down against the uppermost rock. It was foggy, and he thought he heard footsteps. Then there was the telltale sound of a gun cocking and firing, and his vest lit up bright red. John looked up at the ridge above him and, staring down at him from not ten feet up was Kurt-051. Emerging from the woods were four more of his team.

"Good job, John, but I'm afraid I took this round," Kurt said, a sympathetic smile on his face.

John shrugged. "You won the exercise, but, in my opinion, I won," he said. He held out his personal tablet for Kurt to see. Two pictures with the names and faces of Spartans on them on the device were red, while five were green. Thirteen of the pictures were blue. "See that? Half my team survived," John said proudly. "And in war, that's all that matters." He set off down the cliff. "Winning isn't everything," he mused softly to himself.

6. The calm before the storm

****August 10, 2524****

****Chicago, Earth****

Avery Johnson walked into the main rec room of the Seropian Retirement Center dressed in his finest white Marine formal wear. His aunt Marcille had checked into the facility around ten years ago, and he spent a good chunk of his off-duty time with her. She was a seventy-six year old woman, and a widower for a dozen years, but she was in poor health, with no small part of that due to her smoking a dozen or more cigarettes a day. Still, Johnson loved her. She was the

only family he still had.

The spacious rec room was packed with elderly people. Most of them were watching a viewscreen detailing yet another bombing by those damn Insurrectionists. Johnson shook his head in disgust. Those terrorists had killed millions, why would anyone still want to join them? When would they learn that violence was never the answer? One old man in a wheelchair looked up at him. "My grandson lived in that city," he said, more to himself than Johnson, doubt and fear creeping into his voice. "I haven't heard from him or his family yetâ€|"

"Don't worry, sir," Johnson said, getting down on one knee and putting his hand on the man's shoulder. "I'm sure they're fine. And if they aren'tâ€|well, those Innies will pay either way." The man saluted to him, and Johnson did the same. He strode into an elevator and pressed the button to go up to the thirty-seventh floor. It was unusually warm in the elevator, which was a relief from the chilly air outside. Johnson whistled along with the elevator music until the doors opened, and he stepped out of the machine. The doors automatically shut themselves as he walked down a dim hall way with khaki walls and a soft green carpet. He glanced at the golden numbers engraved on the doors of the rooms until he found the one he was looking for: room 37-09. He swiped the keycard he kept on his persona and opened the door, dropping his bags on the floor. Inside the room, the air was frigid; it was much colder than even the outside. "Auntie?" Johnson called. The lights of the room were all of, so he figured she must be out shopping or something. Still, the icy cold was abnormal. He walked around the room and, when he accidentally banged his foot on a table, he bent down and noticed that there really _was _a thin layer of ice covering the surface. He rushed down a hallway towards his aunt's bedroom and knocked on the closed door. When she didn't respond, he opened it in a wide-eyed frenzy. He stepped back, aghast, when he saw what lay in his aunt's bed: her own dead body. He gulped and walked up to her corpse. "Auntieâ€|noâ€|" It wasn't until then that he heard the shouting from outside.

"Why is 37-09 open? Miss Johnson isn't alive, it must be one of her-" the blue-suited, blond orderly outside the room stepped back as Johnson stepped out of the room to confront him. His companion, a man of Asian descent who was wheeling a stretcher, looked nervously at the Marine. "Jesus! Who are you?"

"How many days has she been lying there?"

"L-look, buddy, unless I know who you are-" the man said, pointing his finger at Johnson. The tall Marine grabbed the finger with his right hand.

"I'm her nephew. How. Many. Days?"

The orderly gulped. "Three. The room is on automatic, when she died, the temperatureâ€|droppedâ€|" Johnson let go of the man's finger.

"Take her away," he ordered. The two men nervously set about putting the body of Johnson's only family member on the stretcher and began wheeling it out the door. Johnson stared at the slight indentation his aunt had left on her bed. He let the tears come freely. "Good-bye, Auntie," he said softly. His hands clenched into fists and

he began bawling like the child he had been when his aunt and uncle took him in. '_I've got no one left now_', he thought. '_No one left but the Corps_.'

Forty-five minutes later, Johnson found himself on a stool at a local old-timey bar with dim lighting. He hadn't bothered to change clothes, so the other patrons, of which there were plenty, eyed him warily. He had shrugged them off; while they might be at the bar to find a date or play pool, he was there to forget about his poor little aunt's demise. Perhaps if he drank hard enough, he would think that she was still alive. He slouched low towards the bar, grasping the cheap beer bottle with his hand and rapping his fingers on his arm. He exhaled heavily. He was on his second bottle already, and was seriously contemplating having a third, when a man walked into the bar and took a seat next to Johnson. "A honey julep," he said dejectedly to the bartender, who nodded and went off to fix the drink. Johnson stared at the man, surprised at what he was wearing: a set of white UNSC formal clothes complemented by a single silver bar on his shoulders and chest, the latter of which was home to a plethora of combat ribbons and medals. The man sitting next to Johnson was a First Lieutenant. Said First Lieutenant stared inquisitively at Johnson, taking note of his badges and insignia. "Lieutenant Downs," he said, offering his hand to Johnson. "Not every day I see a fellow Marine in his dress uniform in a bar."

"Staff Sergeant Johnson," Johnson replied, shaking Downs's hand. "I could say the same." This drew a chuckle from the LT, who put his elbow on the table and gripped a lock of his light brown hair.

"Ahâ€¦I'm in a tight spot, sergeant," Downs said. The burly bartender arrived with his amber drink and the LT thanked him for it. He took a slow sip. "The war's going badly, and no one wants to help finish the fight. I'm a recruitment officer, and the brass says my quota is five new recruits to join the military each month. It's the tenth, and I don't have any."

Johnson drained his second bottle. "Yeah, they just don't like this damn war. No one does." He sighed. "Some people think we should pull out of all the systems with Innies in them, but I disagree. _Someone_ has to teach the bastards that mass murder won't get you what you want."

Downs nodded his approval. "Folks need heroes, Johnson. What've you been involved in?"

Johnson took out a miniature tablet from his dress suit pocket and handed it to the LT, who took it, turned it on, and perused through it with interest. "TANGLEWOOD, KALEIDOSCOPE, TREBUCHET? I've barely heard of some of these opsâ€¦but I must say I'm impressed, sergeant. You're quite a head-turner in the Corps."

"Thanks, sir. Lately, though, Iâ€¦my aunt just died, sir, and I was just involved in an op that left some good men dead. The Corpsâ€¦" Johnson struggled to find words. "I just don't know what to do anymore." Downs took note of Johnson's sorrow and offered a sympathetic smile.

"How would you like a different job in the Corps, son? We're training militias on numerous worlds, and the Sergeant Major of the Marine

Corps-you've heard of the man, Major Hidokiro? He's authorized a new militia to be trained on Harvest, and he's looking for a couple of instructors to train the soldiers. He also happens to be a good friend of mine, so I can put in a good word for you if you'd like."

The black marine stared inquisitively at the lieutenant. "You say it's a combat-free job? No fighting, no death?"

"Unless someone trips on a melon," Downs said. Both he and Johnson laughed, as they knew that Harvest's only real claim to fame was as an agricultural world. Even among the Outer Colonies-and Harvest was as far out from Earth as one could get-it had a miniscule population of around 300,000. Chicago alone had eighty times as many people but, considering 'Chicago' took up vast swaths of the former states of Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana, they weren't crammed into a small city. No, Chicago was a super-city through and through. Harvest, on the other hand, only had one city, its capital Utgard, which wasn't even as big as Chicago had been five centuries beforehand.

"Alright, I'll take it," Johnson proclaimed. He shook hands with Downs again. "Bartender!" he called. "Another round for me and my friend here!"

****December 7, 2524****

****Near the barren dwarf planet XO-641****

The section of space in between the UNSC colony worlds Harvest and Madrigal was largely devoid of celestial objects, save for the errant dwarf planet or aimless meteor. XO-641 was one such dwarf planet. It was a ball of frozen rock that orbited nothing; its star had burnt out long ago. It was a third the size of Pluto, and it's only remarkable feature was a tiny impact crater from a meteor that had hit the dwarf planet eons before humanity ever taken to the stars. It was also the location where the unmanned freighter Horn of Plenty had the misfortune to be violently thrown out of Slipspace. The freighter itself was nothing more than a slightly oblong box carrying 2,500 metrics tons of various fresh crops and produce: sweet corn, tangy orange rice, millrose berries and raspberries, and no less than twenty-one types of melons. What was attached to the rear of the freighter that caused its ejection into realspace was a Shaw-Fujikawa Slipspace Propulsion Pod. This little pod, a tenth the size of the craft, was the only thing that gave the Horn of Plenty the ability to slip in and out of Slipspace using tiny rifts in space-time that the ship maneuvered into. It had run this route countless times before, and the reason this trip was different was because the fault sensors on the pod were in dire need of being replaced due to overuse; when the craft reached its maximum possible output, it failed, causing the unintended Slipspace exit. The sole occupant was an AI of limited capabilities, or a "dumb" AI, known as Church. He took the form of a tiny sky-blue UNSC pilot, and quite literally the only thing he ever did was run this particular shipping route on the Horn of Plenty. When the ship had first exited, he used all his processing power to ensure that it tumbled end-over-end only once before he stabilized it. He began running a damage assessment and, after only a small amount of time, managed to discover the reason of the damages. Immediately, he sent a message through his ship's maser to Harvest. It was a distress signal. "DCS AI CRH 0636-7 to Harvest," he said in a somewhat arrogant tone. It was simply part of his

programming; if he could feel emotion even in the limited sense a "smart" AI could, it would not be arrogance but worry. He had to speak in such a manner. "My Slipspace drive has malfunctioned, and I request salvage." The AI knew that it would take two weeks for the burst to reach Harvest, but it would've taken four weeks for it to reach the craft's destination, Madrigal. It would take much longer for any salvage to actually partake because the only thing on the craft worth the amount of money it would take to fly out to the middle of nowhere would be the Slipspace pod, and even that needed repairs.

To tide over the long wait, Church went over the cargo manifest. It would take some time for all the refrigerated produce in the ship to freeze and become inedible, but at least he could entertain himself by checking when they froze. "At least five or six weeks," he mumbled. Then, his navigational radar showed something exceptionally odd. A ship was approaching the Horn, but Church couldn't tell whether it belonged to pirates or members of the UNSC Department of Commercial Shipping. He decided to find out. "DCS AI CRH 0636-7 to unidentified spacecraft. My Slipspace drive is damaged. Can you provide assistance?" He waited, but there was no reply. He continued to beam the message until the ship slunk into his own craft's camera view. It was nothing Church had ever recorded in his database. "Or a few hours," he muttered, shaking his head in an approximation of disbelief.

The unidentified ship was a deep blue in coloration. It had bulbous, curved extensions running along its side, and two fin-like protrusions at the aft section that combined to form what appeared to be an engine. There was no visible bridge, but a strange pointed section protruded slightly from the top. It continued flying towards the Horn at a leisurely pace. Once it came within a few thousand meters of Church's ship, he could discern that it was around four-fifths the size of his ship. Church put his right hand to his virtual chin and his left to his hips, eyeing the approaching ship with suspicion. There were numerous tiny lights on the ship, mostly blue in coloration, but two particular ones on the port and starboard sides of the craft were a bright, vibrant red. They were also getting larger and largerâ€|

"Ah, hell," Church exclaimed before the lasers hit his ship.

They tore into the port side of the Horn and obliterated the thick metal plating. Church quickly changed his salvage message to one of distress. "I am under assault, the ship is being attacked!" he cried, sending the message to the Horn's communications dish. "This is DCS AI CRH 0636-7â€|" The lasers weren't exceptionally powerful in their own right, but the ship could fire them at a rate of two every two seconds. In less than a quarter of a minute, they had created a massive hole in the side of the ship, and soon afterwards had eliminated the ship's communications dish, leaving Church unable to continue sending the distress signal. If the fruit crates hadn't been metallically attached to the floor of the ship, they would have gone flying out into the vastness of space. Even so, many of them were punctured and broken open by the volley. The lasers were nothing like standard UNSC weaponry, and seemed to be made of heated plasma. Church could not realize that, though, due to the fact that that wasn't part of his job. What he did realize is that the other ship was hostile, and he needed to do everything in his power to prevent anything happening to future shipments. As the unknown ship drew

closer, it extended a boarding ramp, and whatever occupants were inside it began to enter Church's ship. He couldn't simply initiate a self-deletion, but he could attempt to force them to cause harm to him, because undoubtedly they were armed. By damaging him, they might damage any records about where his ship was going and where it had come from. It was a small chance, but Church was willing to sacrifice himself in order to prevent these pirates from attacking more freighters.

Alas, it was not meant to be.

He waited until he saw something creep inside the 'cockpit'. What he saw astonished him: a creature clad in a white spacesuit with a dark blue visor. It was either severely deformed or simply not human. The intruder stood exactly six feet tall. It carried in one hand a small, light purple C-shaped weapon with a green band on energy connecting the two halves of the 'C'. It also had a light blue circular shield attached to its arm. The head seemed to be elongated, and made strange hissing, cackling noises. It hadn't noticed Church yet, for he was remaining perfectly still. The being probably thought him part of the scenery. Oh yeah, it was definitely not human. It was followed by a being that was clad in a similar white suit. This second being was a foot shorter than the first, with a large triangular object on its back and stubby appendages. It was unarmed. Both creatures walked into the room and began looking around. Besides Church himself, only a few terminals were in the room. The armed intruder took particular interest in the glowing, motionless AI. It bent down for a closer look.

Church took his tiny holographic fist and slammed it into the creature's face, making it shriek in terror and fire off its weapon, with the former of the two bolts fired hitting Church's data chip. Church could feel part of himself disappearing. His form flickered once, then twice, and finally a third time, before disappearing completely. The creature looked at the ruined piece of equipment and grabbed it. After sorting out how to remove the chip from its slot, it noticed that a sizeable chunk of the chip was missing, the edges charred beyond recognition. It handed the burnt chip to its stockier comrade.

"Take this," the creature commanded in its raspy alien tongue, "to the Shipmistress."

"Fine," the stockier alien said. His name was Dadab, and he was an Unggoy. He was a member of the Covenant Empire, a political and military alliance composed of eight species. Unggoy were one of, if not the lowest, ranking species in the hierarchy of the Covenant. Members of the Covenant pledged unwavering loyalty to their theocratic leaders the San' Shyuum, who were led by an alternating trio of specific San' Shyuum known as the Prophets. The Prophets believed wholeheartedly in the transcendent properties of relics left behind by a vanished race of aliens known as Forerunners. It was believed in the Covenant that finding these relics would eventually lead them to the great Halo rings; seven mystical devices built by the Forerunners whose activation would send them all on the Great Journey to eternal metaphysical bliss. The task of finding the relics was the reason Dadab and the crew of the Kig-Yar Shipmistress Chur'R-Yar's ship Minor Transgression were in such a desolate corner of space.

With the discovery of the alien vessel, the sector didn't seem all that desolate anymore.

Dadab meandered down a hall towards what appeared to be a lift. Oddly enough, it didn't appear to have anti-gravity reactors installed. Instead, he clicked a button that was just above the one he and the Kig-Yar Mek had used to travel down to the area from which the _Minor Transgression_ had been receiving unusual signals. The lift opened up to a large chamber filled with multiple boxes of strange alien fruit. In the room were two more Kig-Yar who were eagerly bringing the fruit through the docking ramp into the _Transgression_. One of them spied Dadabby the lift. He grabbed one of the smaller fruits and threw it at him. "An offering for his holiness!" he warbled. The fruit hit Dadab in the head, and he grunted his malice towards the laughing avians. He skirted along the walls of the room, dodging errant pieces of flying melon, before reaching the docking ramp and bolting into it. Dadab walked through a curved purple corridor and into the ship's tiny methane suite, the only place where he, being of a species that could only inhale methane without dying, could breathe without his mask on. He took off his space-suit helmet and also removed his silver gas mask. It made his jaws ache, and he felt much better by simply unstrapping and tossing the mask to the ground. Of course, it never landed. It was caught by one of the pearlescent tentacles of the _Transgression_'s resident Huragok, whose name was Lighter Than Some. Huragok had an odd way of naming their 'young'. They were quite literally built by older Huragok, and filled with various gases from their numerous 'parents'. They weren't so much children as replicas built using the parts of up to a dozen other members of their species, and, upon creation, would either begin floating normally, float too high, or barely float at all. They were named accordingly, and Lighter Than Some apparently was just as its name implied. The Huragok took Dadab's mask on a hook on the wall, while the Unggoy himself walked over to a purple nipple attached to a thick tube, which was itself connected to a cylindrical tank even taller than himself. He took the nipple in one hand and put it to his mouth, sucking the sour yet nutritious paste that was stored in the tube. Lighter Than Some floated near him, his pink air sacs slowly expanded and retracting. It noticed the alien chip on the ground and, with a purr of delight, picked it up and looked over the damage. Dadab looked at the Huragok warily. "Be careful," he told it in between sucks from the food nipple.

"I will," Lighter Than Some told him in the purrs that composed the speech of its species. It stuck its tentacles into the charred hole the plasma pistol bolt had caused. The tentacle split into a dozen tiny strands that surveyed the damage and the inside of the chip. Dadab shrugged and continued sucking the food nipple for a few seconds before he heard a high-pitched squeal. Turning around, he saw Lighter Than Some twitching violently. The chip was on the ground, and a tiny blue figure appeared on it for a few seconds. It looked to be in pain, and its cries of anguish joined the Huragok's. The blue figure flashed between appearing and disappearing a few times before disappearing completely. The Huragok was still convulsing. "Intelligenceâ€¦factsâ€¦duty!" it purred. "We must tell the Shipmistress!" He picked up the chip and began floating as fast as he could-that is to say, about as fast as Dadab's walking speed-towards the ship's bridge.

The bridge was nothing special. It didn't actually have a window to look out of, but why would it? That would just leave the bridge crew

open to attack; no, like most Covenant ships, the _Minor Transgression_'s bridge was in the center of the ship. It was rimmed by viewscreens in lieu of a window and, in the center, was a standard Covenant hover-chair. The Shipmistress Chur'R-Yar was sitting in the chair. She was an imposing figure with her yellow skin and the brown plates covering her neck, not to mention her generally bad disposition. She was also, as far as Dadab could tell, was on her breeding period, which made her even more cranky. As soon as Lighter Than Some deposited the chip with the tiny malfunctioning creature in it inside a holotank in front of her chair, Dadab decided to tell her what they had found. "Shipmistress, we've found a creature in the chip that tried to communicate with the ship!"

"My ship," Chur'R-Yar growled. Nonetheless, she motioned for the Unggoy to continue.

"We aren't entirely sure what it is, but it appears to be somewhat autonomous andâ€¦" A flash appeared from the chip and the creature from before stood on the holotank, phasing in and out of sight. There was some static, and it stood perfectly still, but a voice emanated from it.

"DCS AI CRH *static*, AI assigned to DCS freighter *static* en route to *static* from Harvest." During the time when the figure said 'DCS freighter', an image of the ship the _Transgression _had attacked showed up on the holotank. When it said 'en route to from Harvest', a picture showed up of a planet, with a dotted line showing the planet's position from the ship's last location before it had been boarded.

"Pause it there!" the Shipmistress ordered. Dadab quickly did so. The planet in the image was enlarged, but the position of it could still be made out by taking into account the nearby stars, some of which were well known to Covenant astrologers.

"That world is obviously inhabited. Good work," she said to her subordinates. "Now, tell me, Deacon," the Shipmistress said to Dadab, "what do you suggest we tell the Ministry?"

Dadab gulped. "I suggest we follow your counsel, Shipmistress."

"Hmmâ€¦perhaps we should wait until we can survey the system," she mused.

"I'm sure the Prophets would appreciate your desire to gather more information," Dadab replied, nodding. He desperately wanted to be promoted, and investigating this mysterious alien world seemed like a good way to do that. Deviating from their designated course wasn't the best idea, but, if it might culminate in a new species joining the Covenant, then the end would justify the mean. Besides, communication blackouts happened all the time to scout ships such as the _Minor Transgression_.

"Yesss," Chur'R-Yar hissed. "Tell Zhar, Mek and Jol to get back on the ship and bring only what they can carry. They will protest, but tell them that soon, very soon, we will find much more than just melons."

7. Friends, old and new

****Thanks to Shikio, kagehisa and gwb99 for favoriting the story, and major wallace for reviewing!****

****December 21, 2524****

****UNSC modified freighter *_**Two for Flinching**_** approaching Harvest****

It had taken over three months, but, finally, the corvette that Johnson had boarded to Harvest had arrived at the planet's home in the Epsilon Indi system. Johnson had been in cryosleep for only part of the journey, but the dreams he did have were frightening. Lately, they all ended the same: the scope of a sniper rifle, looking into a restaurant, where a woman held a detonator next to a little boy's headâ€¦|

Johnson had just finished putting on his Marine battle dress uniform, and was strapping on his boots in the _Flinching_'s locker room when another man walked in. He had short blond hair and mischievous brown eyes. "Hey," the man muttered as he stepped past Johnson. Johnson responded in kind. The man went to a locker and took out a helmet with a red medical insignia on it. "Petty Officer First Class Davis Healy," he said as he inspected the helmet. "Corpsman."

"Staff Sergeant Avery Johnson. Not a corpsman," Johnson replied. Healy chuckled.

"At least I don't have to salute you," he said, referring to the fact that, since Johnson was a marine and Healy was in the Navy, neither of them outranked the other. Johnson nodded in agreement.

"So, what brings you to Harvest?"

"Oh, some sort of militia that I'm supposed to help organize," Johnson said. "You?"

"Colonial Militia Training? Dude, same here!" Healy responded. He presented his outstretched fist to Johnson, who bumped it with as much enthusiasm as he could muster; which is to say, not much at all. Both Healy and Johnson reported soon afterwards to the ship's hanger bay, which barely had enough room for two Pelicans, considering the ship had been modified for the comfort of its occupants. The pilot waiting by one of the Pelicans had his arms crossed and was undoubtedly glaring at the Marine and the Corpsman from behind his helmet.

"Eighty-nine soldiers I've had to deliver, and at the end of the line we stop out here just for _two_? There'd better be a good reason for going weeks out of our way for this," he muttered as he clambered into the dropship. Johnson and Healy followed him, strapping in as the pilot prepared the Pelican for launch. The pilot coerced the dropship out of the _Flinching_'s hanger bay and into space. As Johnson stepped into the cockpit, he could see Harvest in all its beauty. The planet had one large continent devoid of frigid wastes or blistering deserts; indeed, it only appeared to have one mountain range. Most of Harvest's continent was composed of prairies and the occasional deciduous forest. It had no moon, but there was something in Harvest's thermosphere: what appeared to be two arcs, a larger one

positioned above a smaller one and connected by a slanting piece of metal. It had to some sort of space station, albeit one of a strange design. The large open gap between the two halves had, upon close inspection, seven golden strands in them that lead down to the planet. As the Pelican maneuvered through heaps of weathered propulsion pods, Johnson could see that they were the ends of space elevators, and definitely not for the use of people like most space elevators. No, he decided when he saw a shipment of large metal boxes come out of one of them; they must be for agricultural purposes. The Pelican soon found itself approaching the docking bay of the orbital station, where it turned around and landed inside station. Johnson walked back into the bay and exited the ship along with Healy. The Pelican's bay doors closed and it lifted off mere moments after the two soldiers had exited the vehicle. Johnson and Healy found themselves in a mostly deserted hanger bay. Only one freighter was docked there, and only a handful of technicians were in the room.

"Welcome to the Tiara," came an unseen proper female voice. Johnson and Healy looked upwards, but the technicians did not. "I am Harvest's shipping AI SIF 3748-2, otherwise known as Sif. You are Avery Johnson and Davis Healy, I presume?" Both men nodded. "Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make your transit more comfortable."

"Just some directions, ma'am," Johnson said as he took out his standard Marine cap from his duffel bag and put it on his head. He then elbowed Healy in the shoulder for staring a bit too long at one female technician.

"Of course. Just follow corridor twoâ€|yes, that's the one," the voice told the Marine and the Corpsman, both of whom were looking at a circular door with a large number 2 above it. "Follow that until you get to my main control room, and then make an immediate left once you're past there."

"Thank you, ma'am," Johnson said. He and Healy meandered down the corridor in silence, marveling at the incredible view of every window they passed by. Crates were being flung from the space elevators into the vacuum of space between the Tiara's two arcs. Small ships, most of which were piloted by AIs, swooped in to collect them, aided by the propulsion pods that Sif, being the Tiara's shipping AI, had placed on them. The corridor was brightly lit by white lights that gave the beige interior a calm setting. After only ten minutes of walking, and having passed only one technician (a male one, much to Healy's disappointment), the two men found themselves in front of another circular door, this one with the words 'CONTROL ROOM' written in black paint above it. It opened, sliding upwards as soon as they stepped within three feet of it. The room inside was empty, save for multiple unmanned computer terminals, a few well-placed homey plants, and a tall woman with wavy black hair, a drab brown jumpsuit and very dark skin standing next to a circular projector, on which stood the image of a golden woman with neat hair and a long, sleeveless gown. Both of the women immediately turned to look at the two men. "Ummâ€|hello," Johnson said, nervously waving his hand.

"Hi," the black lady said. "Sif, are these the soldiers you were telling me about?"

"Two of the four, yes. Davis Healy and Avery Johnson. This," she

continued, albeit with her gaze directed towards the two men and not the woman, "is-

"Jilan al-Cygni," the woman interrupted, presenting her outstretched hand for Johnson to shake. He did so, and she then moved on to Healy, who also shook her hand. "I was just talking to Sif about a curious event concerning one of the freighters that left the Tiara a month ago."

"Yes," the AI mused, "the Horn of Plenty. I received a transmission earlier today from the ship's AI stating that it required salvage. However, just an hour ago, I received another transmission from the ship that informed me that the ship was under attack. Undoubtedly it has since been destroyed, but the pirates were out in the middle of nowhere."

"That's strange," Healy said, rubbing his chin. "Who would want to steal crops?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," al-Cygni stated. "In any case, it was a pleasure meeting you. Take care on the surface!" she said politely.

"We'll try, ma'am," Johnson said, saluting and smiling at her. The woman smiled at him, and Johnson and Healy walked past the room and through a small door into a balcony, with a little docking station five meters away and a massive glass window that displayed Harvest gloriously. The two soldiers walked into the docking station, which was just a tiny room with a square pattern on the floor. There was a small metal bench, but Johnson and Healy didn't sit down, for a ping was heard, and a tiny tan ship big enough for a dozen people appeared from the pattern, which was actually one end of a large pipe connected to one of the space elevators. Johnson and Healy entered it and took their seats. Almost as soon as they had finished buckling up, the ship retreated back down the pipe at a moderate speed. It descended straight downwards at a much faster rate once the pipe converged with the space elevator.

"So this is what ODS'Ts feel like!" Healy said. The tiny pod fell at an increasingly slower rate as it got back to the surface, until it was moving at less than five miles an hour when it finally hit the ground. Upon their arrival, they exited the pod as technicians started using a forklift to get the pod back on its track that led back up to the pipe. As they walked out from the base of the orbital elevator, they found themselves in a quaint little courtyard, with shrubs and marble stairs and a flagpole displaying the Colonial Administration Authority's flag complete with the grey ring of stars, with two semicircles on top, and the hands in the center grasping a unique symbol. Neither Johnson nor Healy would ever figure out what the symbol meant in their lifetimes. Located just in front of the stairs that led downwards to the street was an AI holotable, which struck Johnson as odd, until an image appeared on it. It was of a young man dressed as a cowboy, wearing a hat and a set of spurs like any cowboy would. "Greetings," he said to the two soldiers. "Now, formally, I'm known as MAK 3743-8, but you two gentlemen can call me Mack," he said in a spotless western drawl. "So, I heard you were coming to train some troops from our fine planet."

"We are, sir," Johnson said. "The Tiara's AI, Sif, told us that-

"Ah, Sif. Ain't she a beauty?" Mack said, a smile splayed across his face. He was obviously very fond of his fellow AI. "Absolutely lovely. Hates it when I flirt with her, though," he added, chuckling.

"She said we were 'two out of four' soldiers assigned to train the militia. If that's the case, than who are the others?" Johnson inquired.

"You'll meet 'em soon enough," Mack replied as he stuck a holographic stalk of wheat in his mouth for no discernable reason other than to look more like a cowboy. "There's a taxi all set for you out front. Have a safe trip!"

"We will, sir," Johnson said. He and Healy walked down the stairs.

Harvest had no moon, and the stars were barely enough light for the soldiers to see the sign that arched over the entrance to the parade ground-turned-military barracks that would house them for the next few months. Fortunately, as they drove a little further on, off of the turbulent gravel and onto smooth pavement, streetlights and floodlights illuminated a large space surrounded by five buildings. A man was sitting on one of the building's steps. Well lit by the headlights, he had a salt-and-pepper buzz cut, tan skin and a robotic prosthetic right arm, with which he was holding a lit cigar. When Johnson brought the taxi to a halt, he was quick to get out and salute, something Healy did after a moment's hesitation. "At ease," the man said. "48789-20114-AJ and 23679-82351-DH?" He was answered by a "yes, sir" from both soldiers. "Good. I am Captain Malcolm Ponders. Here," he said, throwing the cigar butt to the ground and standing up, "let me help you with your gear."

"No need, Captain, it's just the two bags," Johnson said of the duffel bags he and Healy had over their shoulders.

"Travel light, first to fight," Ponders said, smiling. He motioned to the taxi. "Sorry about the civilian vehicle, I've got my other platoon leader looking for the Warthogs in Utgard. Shipping delay, can you believe it?" He chuckled and lit a fresh cigar. "Recruits aren't arriving until Sunday, so you've got two days to prepare."

Johnson was sleeping soundly an hour later when he heard a slamming noise. He woke up grumbling, slowly getting up from his bed in the officer's section of the barracks. The door that was opposite his bed was open, letting floodlight shine into the room. Silhouetted against it was a tall man. Although Johnson could barely make out any features of the man, whoever he was could certainly see him plainly. Healy had awoken from the noise, too, in his bed next to Johnson's. "That's a well-made bed, Johnson," the man said as he stepped further into the room. "After a month in the hospital, you get an _eye _for that sort of thing." Due to his thick Irish accent and the venom in his voice, Johnson knew all too well who the man was.

"It's good to see you again, Nolan," he replied nonchalantly. Nolan Byrne had thin black hair, a thin beard without a moustache, and blue eyes that brimmed with hatred. The left one had a set of burnt scars surrounding it. He was dressed in a standard Marine BDU. "I'm glad

you're alright."

"Are you now?" Byrne yelled as he walked closer to Johnson, his fists tightly clenched. The latter got out of bed.

Johnson held out his hands defensively and backed up. "I'm sorry, Byrne, they were all good men--"

Byrne acted surprisingly fast, charging at Johnson and pinning him to the wall, his hands at Johnson's throat. "Not sorry enough," Byrne growled. While Johnson's hands reached up to his neck, his right leg lashed out and kicked Byrne in the groin. Amid the ignored drone of Healy's "woah"s, Johnson threw a punch at Byrne, who sidestepped, and managed to hit Johnson on the chin, and land another punch on his chest. Johnson stumbled back, and when Byrne charged again, he landed a blow to the Irish man's head, causing Byrne to tumble onto Healy's bed. Healy promptly ran out of the barracks in an effort to inform Captain Ponders. Johnson, meanwhile, aimed his fist towards Byrne's face, but Byrne kicked Johnson's chest to send him reeling onto his own bed. Johnson rolled off and tackled Byrne, and then stood up. The door opened, and Captain Ponders walked in.

"Johnson, Byrne! Stand _down_!" he ordered. Johnson stood where he was while Byrne lurched to his feet. Ponder stared at them both with malice. "Perhaps it's best if we separate you two tonight. Byrne, you and I will sleep in the normal bunks tonight. Now come with me, Staff Sergeant."

"Aye, sir," Byrne replied. He shoved Johnson out of the way as he followed Ponders out the door. Healy, meanwhile, walked into the room, scratching the back of his neck nervously.

"If you don't mind me asking," he asked Johnson, "_what the hell_?"

Johnson sat down on his unmade bed. His olive t-shirt was drenched in sweat, and his cargo pants were all wrinkled. He hunched over and told his story to Healy. "Byrne and I were never the best of friends. We were constantly arguing about something. Even so, there was one op in July," he stated. "And the mission started out so wellâ€¦"

****July 14, 2524****

****Cabash, Tribute****

Two AV-14 Attack VTOL craft flew above the city, weaving through buildings and halting directly over a nondescript square grey building. Even before they softly landed, the occupants-four soldiers in each Hornet-had jumped out and onto the roof. All of them were wearing black, heavily-armored jumpsuits and UNSC pilot helmets. They left the two silver helicopters with twin engines idle on the rooftop and firmly set up grappling hooks on the edge of the building, just above some large windows. All eight soldiers stood above their designated grapple point, and one of the two squad leaders held up three fingers. He and his team were about to enter an Insurrectionist bomb-making factory cleverly disguised as a car manufacturing plant. Their commanding officer had given the mission the go-ahead, and so the teams were sent in to get rid of the bombs and neutralize as many Insurrectionists as possible. The grappling hooks were attached to the trooper's belts, and they each gripped the point where the rope

and belt connected firmly in their non-dominant hand, while their dominant hands held their weaponry, save for the one squad leader: one silenced DMR, four silenced SMGs (one of which was holstered), two silenced Magnums and one Stanchion gauss rifle. The soldiers each took five long strides backwards, and though the winds of dawn whipped around them, they were undeterred. The squad leader lowered one finger, then another, and finally made a fist. The moment he did so, the eight men burst forward with incredible speed, jumping off the building and turning around in midair. They burst through the glass of the factory, landing on the top floor and surprising the 'workers' at their posts. Through the shards of glass, three of them rolled to kneeling positions and fired while the other five fired their weapons immediately, with even the soldier using the gauss sniper rifle landing a glancing blow to one Innies's shoulder that blew the terrorist's arm off. Most of the sixteen Innies were armed, but those that were were killed before they could do more than fire a handful of bullets from their pistols. Though the Insurrectionists had better cover than the UNSC troops, they had poorer weapons and seven of them were gunned down immediately after the troops landed. One Innie, hidden behind a support pillar, tried to detonate explosives in her suit, but she was hit by the quickly-fired rounds of an SMG in the chest and arm and dropped the detonator she had been holding as her body slumped to the ground. The soldiers walked closer to the Innies, firing at any they saw. A few tried to escape, but once one was shot down, the four survivors turned around, fell onto their knees and placed their hands behind their heads. The firefight had lasted only twelve seconds.

One of the squad leaders, the one with the sniper rifle, took a scanner from a small pack on his belt and scanned the manufacturing equipment. He was searching for any explosive materials that the Innies might have put in the cars. Normally, such devices would be easy to find, but the terrorists were constantly changing what compounds made up their weaponry. The six squad members were conducting searches of their own, while the other squad leader was standing by the prisoners, all of whom were shaking nervously. Three men and a woman, between the ages of around thirty to fifty. Scum like them didn't deserve to live. "Nothing in the engines," one team member reported.

"Alpha One to Command, the scanners can't pick anything up. Please advise, over." The squad leader only had to wait for a second before a voice squawked from the communicator in his helmet.

"Time to take the gloves off, Johnson," the voice of the team's CO said.

"Affirmative." Johnson responded. He looked over at the other team leader and nodded once. The other squad leader took the nearest Innies's arm and twisted it, causing it to snap.

"The bombs. Where are they?"

"The-the tires! They're in the tires!" the terrorist cried. The other three prisoners sat silently, glowering at him. Two soldiers ran to a stack of tires and scanned them. Their devices' screens turned green, and they gave thumbs-ups to Johnson.

"Command, this is Bravo One," the other squad leader said in his Irish accent. "We've determined that the bombs are located in vehicle

tires. Keep an eye out for the followingâ€¦" He paused as he scanned over a list of explosive compounds one of his subordinates handed to him via scanner. "Twelve compounds, over."

"Roger, Byrne," the CO said. "Do you still have prisoners?"

"Four of 'em, sir."

"ONI wants the ones you talked to. Neutralize the rest."

Byrne actually smiled behind his helmet. "Affirmative, sir." As the terrorist with the broken arm was still moaning in pain and struggling to get up, Byrne shot the contents of his cartridge into the back of the Innies next to him. Before he had fallen, Byrne shot the prisoner next to him in the back and neck, while the final prisoner received bullets to the side of the head. "Get this sorry wreck up top," Byrne ordered a soldier. The trooper nodded and hoisted the injured Insurrectionist over his shoulder. He and the others walked up a set of stairs adjacent to the side of the factory and onto the rooftop. They arrived just in time to see a police-variant Pelican arrive. Three more were in the distance, and the sound of sirens filled the air. Fortunately, no police officers would be killed that day. Eight more Insurrectionists would perish, though, along with three UNSC troops, who boarded a Hornet and flew off into the dawn mere minutes before their deaths.

"We've located a new source of the explosive compounds," the CO's voice chirped in Johnson's helmet. "Tire markings, headed into a Jim Dandy's diner at the corner of Lawyer and Sixth. Due west of your position."

"Understood, Colonel. We're en route," Johnson said. Twenty minutes later, the Hornets arrived at the restaurant. Johnson could see the tire markings from his position on one of the Hornets hovering above an office building across an intersection from the diner, and could also see the vehicle that had made them: a large hauler. Through the thermal view of his Stanchion rifle's scope, he could make out red blips on the tires of the hauler. This was because of what had made the marks on the street below, which also glowed red through the scope: the explosive compounds. The scope made Johnson view things in only four colors. People or other hot objects were white, while lukewarm objects were grey and cold objects were pitch black. The explosive material was a vivid red, though. As he peered at the restaurant, he saw over three dozen people inside, most of them eating. He noticed one bright area that was completely red, at the foot of a stool which was occupied by a man who had faint traces of red coloration on him as well. "Target located," he whispered to his CO. However, by the time Johnson had finished saying that, the target had walked out of the diner, holding the door open for a young couple and their two rowdy boys. The individual had sauntered to his hauler and was ruffling through his pocket for the keys when the CO replied, "Fire when ready." Johnson, who had tracked the man since he first detected that the man was covered in explosive compounds, wasted no time in firing. The white blast flew in a perfectly straight line from the barrel of Johnson's rifle to the back of the target, sending his body slamming into the side of the hauler. There was an exceptionally large hole through the man, and a blackened impact mark on the door of his tan hauler that was rimmed with blood.

"We all clear?" Byrne growled over the comm.

"Negative," Johnson replied. "There's still a bomb in the diner, right next to a stool."

While Johnson and his team remained hovering above the office building, Byrne piloted his team's Hornet towards the restaurant. Already, pedestrians were trying to get a good look at the corpse, but when the Hornet landed, and four burly UNSC soldiers jumped off of it, most of them exited the area immediately. The soldiers rushed inside the restaurant. A few people who were calmly eating their breakfast got up and stared. Those sitting on stools near the front counter looked on in a mixture of awe and terror as the soldier known as Bravo Three snatched up a silver purse from the ground. As soon as he did so, he heard a faint voice say, "Crap." Standing there was a middle-aged woman in black pants and a silver top looking wild-eyed at the purse in Bravo Three's hand. Through Johnson's scope, he could see that she, too, had specks of red on her. He fired, but, in the split second before the bullet would have hit her, she leapt to the right and grabbed a little boy. The bullet made a massive hole in the tiles of the restaurant floor, and its occupants panicked. Byrne and the rest of Bravo squad couldn't shoot her due to the risk of hitting civilians, most of which were running towards the exit. Byrne was actually trampled by one man, who fell on top of him.

"Oh God, run!" the civilian cried.

"Shoot her, Johnson! Fire NOW!" Byrne screamed, even as more diner patrons surged in front of him, knocking him down just outside the entrance to the restaurant.

"I can't get a good angleâ€¦!" Johnson muttered in response.

Meanwhile, the Innies were backing up towards the restrooms. "Get back or I'll kill them all!" she yelled. Johnson couldn't distinguish her from the boy she was holding in front of her. The boy's father was slowly walking towards her, his hands held up in a peaceful manner. One of the soldiers, however, took a more direct route, jumping at the woman while another soldier held the father back.

"Now, dammit, NOW!" Byrne yelled as he got up and started backing away from the restaurant.

The woman had nothing but terror in her eyes as she hit the button on the detonator.

The resulting explosion had an epicenter of the purse, which was lying at the feet of Bravo Three. The shockwave shattered the glass windows of the diner and knocked many people still in the restaurant off their feet. It completely demolished the diner, sending people just outside of it flying into the street. One such person was Nolan Byrne: he couldn't withstand the explosion and was sent back fully a dozen feet, his armored frame hitting a car in the 'shotgun'-side door. The visor on his helmet had been blasted apart, and some of the shrapnel was located around his eye. He couldn't move; the pain was just too much. As he lay there, slumped against the car (whose occupants were running away from the explosion), he heard the sound of a Hornet. In an odd twist of fate, Bravo Team's Hornet had survived the blast, but most of its occupants hadn't. As soon as Alpha Team's Hornet touched down, Johnson immediately ran over to

Byrne.

"Nolanâ€|Byrne! Are you alright?" By this time, the other Alpha Team members had crowded around Johnson.

"Whyâ€|didn't you takeâ€|the shot?" Byrne inquired weakly. Johnson opened his mouth to reply, but, with a shuddering gasp, Byrne slumped to the ground. "Tell commandâ€|to wake meâ€|when they need me."

****December 22, 2524****

****CAA Militia Training Reserve 036-1****

"Ten civilians died in the blast, along with the bomber and all the other members of Bravo Team. Like I said, Byrne and I have never really gotten alongâ€|but he didn't deserve that. Three broken ribs, a bunch of stitchesâ€|the agony of a mission gone wrongâ€|" Johnson sighed. "No wonder he hates me more than ever. If I had just taken that shotâ€|"

"As a medic, I constantly lose people that I feel I could've saved. Would you have been able to cope with killing the boy if you could save the others?"

"Iâ€|no, I couldn't. He was too young."

"He's with his family, now, somewhere. Now, I'm going to bed." Healy lay down on his bed and crawled under the covers. "I suggest you do the same."

8. Another day at the office

****Huge thanks to Shikio and Rust Cohle for reviewing, and My Wunderwaffle iz missin for favoriting! In response to Shikio: this fanfic is designed as a movie plot, so having a movie-like feel is what I'm aiming for! In response to Rust Cohle: I'm aiming for lots of detail so readers can visualize it in their heads! But you're right about the pacing. Fear not, once I get to some good old-fashioned human vs alien action scenes, I think the pacing will shine through.****

****December 26, 2524****

****Gladsheim Highway, Harvest****

The glaring sun that was Epsilon Indi was of no help to the seventy-two men and women jogging along the side of the highway next to Harvest's typical tall prairie grass. They didn't have helmets to protect against the sunlight, and were sweating profusely. Like any good drill instructor, though, Johnson and Byrne were marching right alongside their cadets. It was their first run as a unit, so they were taking it easy: it was only a four-mile run. Tomorrow it would be five, and the next day it would be six. The trainees wouldn't like that, but they had been the ones to enlist. Johnson and Byrne marched in front of two lines of soldiers: Johnson and his First Platoon on one side of the highway, with Byrne and his Second Platoon on the other. Driving in the middle of the road were Captain Ponders and corpsman Healy in a transport Warthog, who were unafraid of traffic.

They had passed only ten cars since setting out on the journey, and were coming along the home stretch. It had taken half an hour for the cadets to jog to the designated marker, and it would take only a few minutes now for them to finish jogging back to the CAA barracks. Johnson and Byrne met eyes. Johnson mouthed a word to Byrne, who nodded back. It was time to test the cadets on what they knew. The seventy-two recruits had been given a packet immediately upon arriving at the base the previous evening, and it had been assigned as homework, of sorts. One page on the packet contained the most common UNSC marching cadence, which the two Staff Sergeants called out in perfect unison: "Helljumper, Helljumper, where have you been?" Fortunately, most of the recruits picked up on the cadence and repeated it. Those who had forgotten the words could easily join in.

"_Helljumper, Helljumper, where have you been_" they repeated.

"Feet first into hell and back again!"

"_Feet first into hell and back again_"

"When I die, please bury me deep!"

"_When I die, please bury me deep_"

"Place an MA5 down at my feet!"

"_Place an MA5 down at my feet_"

"Don't cry for me, don't shed one tear!"

"_Don't cry for me, don't shed one tear_"

"Just pack my box full of PT gear!"

"_Just pack my box full of PT gear_"

"'Cuz early one morning, 'bout zero-five!"

"_'Cuz early one morning, 'bout zero-five_"

"The ground will rumble, there'll be lightning in the sky!"

"_The ground will rumble, there'll be lightning in the sky_"

"Don't be afraid, don't come undone!"

"_Don't be afraid, don't come undone_"

"It'll just be my ghost on a PT run!"

"_It'll just be my ghost on a PT run_"

December 26, 2524

Space above Harvest

The image above the holotank onboard the _Minor Transgression_ no longer displayed a twitchy, blue alien, but instead it displayed a

planetary system: five planets and thirty moons among the last two, which were gas giants, along with a few comets and errant asteroids. There was also a bright yellow sun. Dadab was intrigued by this, mainly because the third planet from the sun was covered in cyan glyphs, each sharing the exact same design. It was composed of one hollow circle that had a small gap at the bottom, and another circle inside. There was one more symbol, too: a large grey one situated in what appeared to be the only mountain range on the planet. Dadab was standing in front of the monitor, entranced by it. Two of the Kig-Yar, Jol and Mek, were staring at a viewscreen. Zhar was standing at Chur'R-Yar's side. The Huragok Lighter Than Some was floating through the entrance to the bridge. "Huragok," the Shipmistress squawked, "I want you to disable the Luminary," she said, pointing to a device that was positioned just past the holotank. It was composed of a single silver pyramid with an array of various colored lights on its surface-chiefly blue and red. The Luminary was instrumental in assigning and identifying Forerunner glyphs such as the ones that dotted the surface of the planet that the _Transgression _flew closer and closer to. They had been in the system for a few days, fearing that the alien craft might have more dangerous allies in what they took to be its home system, but had only seen a handful of ships return to the planet detailed on the holotank, and hadn't dared attack any. But, much to Dadab's surprise, when relics were involved, Yar was exceptionally risky.

"The Luminary? It is heresy to tamper with one! We must report these findings to the Hierarchs at once!" Dadab cried. Yar silenced him with a violent glare.

"The Hierarchs will be informed after I take my pick of the plunder. See that?" she inquired, getting out of her hover-chair and walking to the holotank. She pointed one bony finger towards the projection, which displayed one miniscule cyan glyph slightly off-kilter with the planet. "That is a relic located in an alien freighter. I intend to retrieve it."

Dadab looked nervously at Yar as Lighter Than Some began its task, floating over to the Luminary and beginning to dismantle it. The Unggoy was quaking underneath his orange jumpsuit. Even so, the Shipmistress seemed adamant. "Set a course for that freighter!" she ordered the other Kig-Yar. Dadab realized that what she was about to perform was heresy, but he was in no position to stop her.

Henry Gibson was sitting in the pilot's chair of his personal freighter _This End Up _and took another handful of chips from the bag he was holding. Depositing them in his mouth and chewing thoughtfully, he clicked a button on the computer console in front of him, cooling down his Slipspace drive. His was a large freighter that carried not fruits and vegetables but large JOTUN farm machines. He was one of the Mars-based firm's most efficient pilots, and the prototypes in his hull were of utmost importance. He swallowed, and his hands reached towards a communications button. He deposited the empty chip bag in a portable trash compactor next to his seat and spoke into the microphone next to the comm button. "Captain Henry Gibson of freighter _This End Up _to Harvest, I am approaching at a safe angle, over." A few seconds later, he got his reply.

"Harvest to Captain Gibson, maintain trajectory. You are clear, over," came a regal feminine voice. Having run the route from Mars to Harvest four times before, Gibson determined that it had to belong to

the AI Sif, who ran operations up on the Tiara space station where Gibson sometimes picked up shipments of crops. When he was delivering JOTUN machinery, though, he landed in Harvest's capital of Utgard. Today looked to be another average day in his line of work.

He was wrong.

He was about to wrap up his conversation with Sif when something happened. There was a deafening explosion, and bright red lights turned on. Combined with the wailing alarm signal, it was too much for Gibson to comprehend. He yelled in rage, grabbing a blunt fire extinguisher to arm himself with. Piracy was unheard of while traversing to Harvest, and what good would the prototype earth-tilling machine be to anyone? He put on a helmet that would allow him to breathe in a vacuum. That, combined with his already space-suited jumpsuit, would allow him to survive being near the massive hole that he soon discovered in his ship. Outside was an indigo-colored ship with a strange design. He noticed some creatures over by the JOTUN machine. They didn't look entirely human, and were making strange cackling noises. He was about to deal with them when he heard a surprised yelp from behind him. Turning around, he saw a pudgy creature in a white space suit. There was a pyramidal structure on its back, and it had flat feet and four-fingered hands. The creature jumped back as Gibson smashed his fire extinguisher into its chest. The creature shrieked in fear, but Gibson hit it again and again. "You break my ship? You buy it!" He was preparing to smash the creature a fourth time in its odd little face when something wrapped around his neck and flung him away from it. In the process, Gibson's helmet came undone, and it slowly floated through the room towards the massive gash in the ship. Gibson, too, was being drawn out of his ship towards the cold vastness of space. He started to choke, and, soon after he sailed past two inquisitive creatures that stopped checking out his prototype cargo long enough to gaze at his floating body, he was dead due to a lack of oxygen.

Dadab watched as the alien who had attacked him sailed off into space. If it weren't for his magnetized boots, he might have done the same. He turned his attention to the Covenant that had saved him. "Lighter Than Some?" he incredulously asked. "You saved me?"

"It was going to kill you," the Huragok bleated. "Unfortunately, I killed it to protect you." It floated off, obviously upset over taking a life. Zhar walked into the alien vessel a few moments later. "One of the Reclamation glyphs has vanished!" he yelled. Jol, Mek and Dadab stood, staring at each other and murmuring.

"We didn't touch anything!" Jol said before Zhar slapped him.

"You must have! No matter, this ship is useless to us now without a relic. Come! We shall destroy it and move on." He used his short-range jetpack to leap back to the Minor Transgression in a few short jumps. Jol and Mek followed him. Dadab stared at the space where the alien's corpse was slowly drifting off. "No it couldn't have been!" he whispered.

Mere minutes later, the Shipmistress turned her ship's weapons on the alien freighter, shooting multiple bursts of plasma at it. The alien ship cracked in half, and even more explosions blew off good chunks of it. The Transgression resumed heading slowly towards the alien

world.

****December 26, 2524****

****Tiara Space Station over Harvest****

"Bring me up to speed, Sif," Jilan al-Cygni ordered as she paced the AI's control room onboard the Tiara. A few technicians were also in the room, no doubt wanting to hear more of the alarming news Sif had reported minutes earlier.

"Gladly. Twenty minutes ago, I was engaged in a standard entry procedure drill with one Henry Gibson of the freighter This End Up. When I told him his trajectory was clear, he failed to respond and his ship stopped moving." As Sif relayed this information, images appeared of a dot and a dotted path behind it, and a large sphere which was undoubtedly Harvest on the transmitter alongside her. Sif pointed to the location where the bot was, and it vanished. "Fifteen minutes ago, This End Up disappeared from my radar, and no Slipspace entry was recorded."

al-Cygni rubbed her chin. "You're saying the ship exploded," she said after a few seconds. Sif nodded gravely. "This is the second ship we've lost in a month. That's never happened before," the woman stated with a hint of worry in her voice. She paced around some more, before Sif suggested something.

"Isn't the Harvest branch of the militia being trained by ORION soldiers?" al-Cygni's eyes widened, her mouth opening a bit as if to say something. However, when she turned to look at Sif, the golden AI could only shrug.

****December 27, 2524****

****Covenant missionary ship **_Minor Transgression**_**

Dadab was by himself in the darkened bridge. The Kig-Yar were all sleeping in other rooms, but he was wide awake, and extremely cautious. He was in the middle of sending a coded message to any nearby Covenant ship. It would mean death if the Shipmistress found out, but what she was proposing was heresy. He had finished messing around with the communications console in the bridge and breathed a methane-filled sigh of relief. "There. Now help will arrive."

It would be over a month before another Covenant ship got to the alien star system. By that time, all the Kig-Yar that Dadab despised so much would be dead.

****January 4, 2525****

****CAA Militia Training Reserve 036-1****

The targets in the firing range were at various ranges, ranging from two meters to ten meters. Set in an earthy clearing near the main barracks amongst the prairie grass, they consisted of twelve metal ranges with a white wooden target positioned at each end, and circles around the 'head' and 'chest' of the vaguely human-shaped targets detailing either ten, twenty-five or fifty point areas. The recruits had a system: each day, they would test out various weapons on the targets. The dozen recruits with the worst marksmanship would have to

paint over places where the paint-filled bullets the recruits used impacted on the targets. They had only started this training exercise the previous day, and already some white spots were much fresher than others on the targets. Today, a dozen recruits were testing out tactical training round-variant M6E handguns. Johnson and Byrne were surveying them from the sidelines. "Osma doesn't seem to know when to reload," Byrne said, pointing to one slightly overweight recruit who reloaded, fired two shots from his eight-shot clip, and ejected the ammo clip. Johnson grunted in reply. "You should teach him better," Byrne replied. There wasn't the slightest indication that Byrne might be joking, so Johnson just ignored him. "These recruits know _nothing _about weaponryâ€|" Byrne muttered. Arms crossed, he glared at the militia until a call brought both Staff Sergeants turning around.

"Byrne, Johnson!" Ponders called. He was walked briskly towards them, a paper grasped in his prosthetic. "This arrived in the mail today." He handed the paper to Johnson, who took it. The paper read: 'Governor Nils Thune of Harvest cordially extends an invitation for Staff Sergeants Nolan Byrne and Avery Johnson to join him on the evening of January 5, 2524 at 6:00 at the Utgard Parliament Building, located at 106 Karimia Street.' The platoon leaders stared at the fancy script until Byrne looked up at Ponders.

"It doesn't say why," he noted in his thick accent. Ponders put his hand to his chin.

"Yeah, I noticed that. Looks pretty damn official, though. It might be nice. Tell you what, I'll take over training the grunts until you get back."

"Alright, sirâ€|" Johnson said with some hesitation in his voice. "Wonder why we're going, though."

"You'll find out tomorrow night, won't you?" Ponders replied. His Staff Sergeants only looked at each other in a confused manner.

"I guess we will," Byrne said, shrugging.

****January 5, 2524****

****Utgard, Harvest****

The Warthog pulled up to the I-shaped Parliament building at precisely 6:20. Byrne and Johnson stepped out from the driver's and passenger's seats, respectively. Both men were dressed in their white formal military uniforms. As soon as they neared the building entrance, they noticed a man standing just to the right of the door. The man watched them as they walked towards him. "Staff Sergeants Byrne and Johnson?" he asked.

"That's us," Johnson said, nodding.

"I'm Attorney General Rol Pedersen. It's an honor to meet you both," the man said. He had light skin and white hair that showed little sign of balding. He also wore glasses, which the sunlight glinted off of as he shook the Staff Sergeant's hands, and a grey suit. "The others are right this way. If you'll just follow me," he said as he led the soldiers inside the building. Byrne and Johnson marveled at the dÃ©cor, with potted plants at every corner and grand marble

stairs. It reminded them both of the park near the space elevator. Surprisingly, the building was empty. Johnson and Byrne saw no one save for Pedersen as they strolled up a level, the floor of which was covered in scarlet-and-gold carpet.

"Where _is _everyone?" Johnson asked.

"Oh, Governor Thune didn't want anyone eavesdropping on us tonightâ€¦" Pedersen said. He halted in front of a set of elegant old-fashioned oak doors. "The others should be in here," he explained as he pulled on the handle, opening the door. He motioned his hand, and the two ORION soldiers walked in. A handful of men and women in business-casual attire were in the room, sitting at a long table where food was ready to eat. On the far side of the room was a viewscreen.

"Dinner _and _a show?" Johnson joked, but Byrne paid him no attention. Johnson scanned the faces at the table and, to his surprise, recognized one of them: Jilan al-Cygni, the lady from the Tiara! It was not her, however, who stood up to greet the ORIONS, but a chubby redheaded man wearing an elaborate maroon sportsjacket.

"Greetings, my friends!" he said, offering his hand for the ORIONS to shake. "I'm Governor Nils Thune, and I welcome you to the Parliament!" Johnson and Byrne both smiled. "Please, have a seat!" the governor continued in his hearty tone. He motioned for the soldiers to sit. "The meal tonight was prepared by the finest chefs in Utgard! Seasoned chicken flatbread, delicious tomato soupâ€¦help yourself!" He turned his attention to the people at the table. "Mayors, officers, friends! I trust that you have at least heard of the fine men who are building a militia to keep Harvest safe!" There was applause, and Governor Thune relished in it. "Before we get down to business, let's eat!"

"Hear hear!" one official at the table said as he raised a wine glass. The men and women around him laughed. Johnson and Byrne took their seats and began sampling the food. Johnson sat next to al-Cygni.

"Jilan!" he said. "Nice to see you again," he continued, offering his hand, which the woman vigorously shook.

"Likewise, Avery. How do you like Harvest so far?"

"Just keeps on getting better," Johnson replied, sipping some sparkling white wine. "I'd like to know why I'm at this meeting, though. Doesn't really seem like it contains me or Byrne, here," he said, motioning to his fellow Staff Sergeant, who was chewing thoughtfully on a piece of bread.

al-Cygni playfully dismissed Johnson with a wave of her hand. "Just enjoy the meal, you'll find out soon enough."

"But -"

"Ah-ah-ah," the woman said, wagging her finger and half-smiling, half-smirking at Johnson. The man stared at her with confusion for a few seconds, and then silently resumed eating his salad.

Around half an hour later, Byrne was sitting glumly, twiddling his thumbs, while Johnson contemplated eating one last piece of red velvet cake that lay on a platter temptingly close to him. Most of the other guests had finished dining, and were engaging in polite small talk. Suddenly, a male voice with a Texas drawl sounded out from nowhere. "Looks like y'all are done with your meal," it said. Johnson instantly recognized Mack's cheerful voice. The AI himself materialized on a pedestal directly to the right of the viewscreen, from an observer's point of view. A few of the guests needed to turn around to get a better view of him, but he was easy to hear considering there were only a dozen people in the room. The orange cowboy that was Mack's avatar took off his hat. "Now, it is my pleasure to introduce the lovely, amazing, beautiful Miss-

An angry groan was heard as a golden woman in a fancy dress appeared on a pedestal to the left of the viewscreen: Sif. "Shut _up_, Mack," she breathed, before turning her attention to the guests assembled in front of her. "Hello, everybody. It is of my knowledge that only the Governor, Attorney General and Miss Jilan al-Cygni realize the full extent of what you are all doing here tonight." She motioned towards the viewscreen and a blueprint-like image appeared on it of an unassuming freighter. "This is a diagram of the DCS freighter _Horn of Plenty_. On December 21, I received a message from the AI onboard reporting a Slipspace drive malfunction. A few hours later, I received a message from the same ship saying that it was under attack. Now, while it was odd for pirates to attack a shipping freighter, that isn't the whole story. On December 26, I received a message from a ship called _This End Up_, _captained by one Henry Gibson. He was in the middle of a conversation with me when he suddenly stopped transmitting." Here, the picture changed to a different freighter. "A few minutes later, his ship blew up."

"Two attacks in a month? That's obviously terrorism," one woman said. Sif nodded solemnly.

"Which is why," she said, "we have Staff Sergeants Byrne and Johnson here." Immediately, the two soldiers sat up straight and paid as much attention as they could muster. "You are all important officials on Harvest. Police Chief Adam Hewitt, JOTUN representative Rebeka Emesâ€|you all inspire order and awe amongst our people. If they ever learn that there is a potential terrorist attack comingâ€|well, it wouldn't be good for their morale." She turned her attention fully on the two soldiers. "An ONI official has authorized a mission to find and neutralize these terrorists, and you two will take part in it."

"ONI official?" Johnson said in disbelief. "Who?"

"Why, Mr. Johnson, you've been sitting next to her for the last half hour."

Johnson quickly turned to stare at al-Cygni. "You? Butâ€|how couldâ€|"

"Lieutenant Commander al-Cygni. I'll be running intel on tomorrow's op," Jilan said with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Then who runs the DCS out here?" Byrne inquired, brimming with anger.

al-Cygni shrugged. "Ever heard of multi-tasking?"

"Hang on. _Tomorrow's_ op?" Johnson said. "What are we going to do tomorrow?"

"For most people here, their job is to simply be prepared to alert the populous. Otherwise, just act normal. For you, Johnson, we have another task," al-Cygni stated.

"Precisely, pardner," Mack said. "You'll be using a broken-down freighter and lying in wait for these Insurrectionists and/or pirates. It might take a while for them to find you, but, when they do, you'll need to retaliate. Don't worry, Mr. Byrne here will assist you."

"So that's what this meeting was for? To send us on a combat mission?" Byrne asked. The other guests looked strangely at him and Johnson.

"Don't think of it like that," Sif said. "You two have the opportunity to save thousands of lives, and any information you find on the terrorist's goals will help the UNSC a great deal."

"Still," Byrne huffed, "I'd rather have someone more trustworthy watching my back."

9. First contact

****Thanks to dshznet44 and 1 for favoriting, and Wolfshark for following!****

****January 7, 2525****

****Decommissioned freighter **_**Bulk Discount **_**above Harvest****

Johnson had been sleeping peacefully in the captain's chair of the weathered freighter he had been stationed on until Byrne meandered up to him and slugged him on the shoulder. "Nap time's over, Johnson. We've got a contact." Johnson yawned and rubbed his eyes before getting out of the chair. He and Byrne had been assigned to wait in the freighter for three days, or until a pirate's ship showed up. They had enough food and water, but one thing they had lacked was communications: in order to appear like a salvageable wreck, the only way the two ORIONs could communicate with the Tiara was through a one-time-use distress button, at which case another freighter would come along and pick them up.

The _Bulk Discount _was very small. Only half a dozen empty shipping containers lay in her hold and, despite being eight feet tall and wide, they more or less covered the entire holding bay. The engines had been dismantled, and so had some of the lights; both men onboard had felt like they were stepping into a ghost ship upon initial arrival. Now, however, they were painfully aware that it was going to be occupied soon. They ran to a room complemented with two black vacuum suits with clear visors. The helmets made it appear like Byrne and Johnson were wearing giant fishbowls, but they felt secure knowing that they wouldn't die of asphyxiation any time soon. Also in the room were a handful of weapons: two BR55 battle rifles and two M7

SMGs. The men each picked up a battle rifle and carefully walked towards the bridge. Once they were inside of it, Johnson clicked a button, and an image appeared on a small holotable of the _Discount_ and the pirate ship that was careening towards it. "I've never seen anything like that," Byrne said of the strange bulbous craft.

"Neither have I," Johnson affirmed, "but it's probably hostile." Immediately after he said this, a violent explosion sounded throughout the ship, throwing Johnson to the ground and making Byrne have to grasp the captain's chair for support. "Make that _certainly_ _hostile_," he said. "C'mon, we should go fend 'em off," he told Byrne. Byrne shot the glass box enveloping the distress button and hit it with his fist before wordlessly following his fellow soldier out the bridge and into a short hallway. They ran down it, rifles gripped firmly in their hands. The door that led to the hold automatically opened once Johnson got within a meter of it, so they both rushed in to the room without surveying where their opponents might be. They both readied their guns, and trained them towards the figures that were stepping through the smoke caused by the explosion. But, when they realized just what those figures were, they both gasped in horror.

There were four creatures, each around the size of a person. They had white vacuum suits on, and carried an array of odd weapons. The one in front seemed to have a pistol with numerous pink shards sticking out of it, with the one immediately to its left carried a similar-looking device, except it was elongated like a rifle. The remaining two carried indigo pistols with green bands running from the top to the bottom. All four creatures were hunched over, and appeared to have only three fingers. The ones with green pistols carried bright blue shields strapped to their arms, and the one in front had a purple shield. All four creatures lurched back in surprise as Johnson and Byrne entered the room, and Johnson fired a trio of bullets at the alien with the purple shield. The creature maneuvered its arm to deflect the bullets with its large circular shield, but one of the bullets hit it nonetheless. The alien cackled in pain and started to move back towards its ship, with the two marines firing at its unprotected back. The bullets were reflected by another one of the aliens, all of whom were grouping together in an effort to cover their leader's retreat. The recoil knocked the men back a little, but they continued to fire at the intruders, who shot back with green bolts of plasma. The one with the rifle also fired, with a pink needle-like shard ricocheting off the wall behind the men and hitting the ground. The marines took cover behind two of the crates that were closest to the door. The plasma splashed onto their crates, but they returned fire once every few seconds. "We need to take one alive!" Byrne shouted.

"Right!" Johnson replied. He shot three more bullets at the alien with the purple rifle, hitting it in the neck. The alien dropped to the ground, and was finished off with a headshot from Johnson.

"Nice one!" Byrne called out.

"Thanks-argh!" Johnson cried. He had been hit in the side by one of the green bolts. It tore right through the vacuum suit, melting part of it and charring Johnson's skin and clothes underneath.

"Johnson, you alright?" Byrne asked. As he removed himself from cover

to fire, he was hit in the stomach by one of the green plasma bolts as well, and he yelled in pain. The remaining two aliens were advancing closer.

Johnson refocused and shot a burst at one of their legs. The alien jumped back in pain, and Byrne finished it off with two bursts to the chest. Its comrade squawked, and fired at Byrne, hitting him in the knee. Johnson rushed at the creature and swatted aside its gun with his own rifle. Unexpectedly, the alien pulled out a pink crystalline dagger and took a jab at Johnson, who backstepped and shot two bursts right into the thing's visor. It dropped dead instantly. The two marines reloaded their battle rifles. "Remember what I said about taking one _alive_?" Byrne said angrily.

"There's still one left, at least," Johnson pointed out as he dashed off towards the alien ship. Fortunately, in zero gravity, he could easily make the leap from the _Discount _to the enemy vessel. Byrne followed suit.

"al-Cygni's ship could be here at any moment, and it is going to fire on _this _vessel! The opportunity is gone!" Byrne snapped, pointing his finger at the floor of the ship. They had managed to jump into a small room covered with florescent violet lights and a brown floor, with dark purple walls. There was a blue energy field at the far end of the room, which was composed of what looked to be a door. Fearing that their suits had been breached, the men walked up to the door and, when it automatically opened, passed through it.

"We still have this one chance, and I am _not _going to let it slip through our fingers," Johnson responded. He breathed deeply to calm his nerves and readied his rifle. "Now let's catch an alien."

Johnson and Byrne crept stealthily through the small ship. They were rounding a hallway when they saw a floating squid-like creature near a hatch. It mewed at the sight of them, and floated off in the opposite direction. Since it posed no threat, the men moved on. "What is that thing?" Johnson asked.

"If I knew, I'd tell ye," Byrne replied. As soon as they rounded a corner, a small alien with a pyramidal structure on its back walked down the other corridor to the hatch, lugging two small tanks (one filled with methane, one filled with food sludge and water) behind him. "What are those things?" it inquired in its alien tongue to the floating squid. The black and florescent blue alien moved its tentacles up and to the sides: the equivalent of a shrug. The squatter alien walked a few steps to the hatch, opened it, and closed it once the floating alien had gotten inside. It then clicked a button inside the cylindrical pod they were in that jettisoned it off into space, entering subspace a few moments later and vanishing with a flash of light.

Johnson and Byrne, meanwhile, had gotten close enough to their quarry to warrant being shot at: as soon as they opened a door which led into what appeared to be the bridge, the alien shot four pink crystals at them. Both men rolled out of the way, but the shards seemed to track Johnson. If he hadn't rushed behind some sort of computer console with flashing multicolored lights on it that absorbed the needles, he would've gotten hit by them. The alien turned its attention to Byrne, protecting itself with its shield and

firing off a dozen more shards in quick succession. Byrne ducked behind another console, causing the shards to hit it and ricochet up to the ceiling. Johnson used his opponent's momentary distraction to dash out behind cover and aim his rifle at the enemy's rear. "Don't move!" he commanded.

The alien had other plans. It swiveled around, squawking in its cacophonous tongue and firing more shards at Johnson. One of them hit his shoulder, and caused him to stumble back in pain. Byrne got up from his kneeling position and ran, hollering in rage, full-speed towards the alien, tackling it from behind. He and the creature tussled on the ground, with the alien managing to turn around on its back and take out another pink dagger. Byrne noticed that it was made of the same stuff as the shards that had been fired from the weapon before he found it nicking his stomach. When the alien moved to stab him, however, Byrne reversed the thrust and impaled the dagger inside his enemy. The Irish man started to get up, but the dagger exploded in the alien's stomach, blasting Byrne back. The shard lodged in Johnson's shoulder also cracked apart, leaving a shallow bloody crater that was nonetheless painful. Johnson grasped his shoulder and the two men both sprinted to the door of the bridge as an explosion rocked the enemy vessel. "Oh, yeah," Johnson said, his teeth clenched in pain. "al-Cygni."

Jilan al-Cygni's sloop Walk of Shame was headed towards the alien ship and Bulk Discount, and was firing missiles at the former in an attempt to destroy it. The two marines inside dashed through the purple corridors and at one point skidded into a wall due to an explosion. The sloop, shaped like a pen and made of gleaming silver steel, fired another set of missiles which blasted off a massive chunk of the alien ship. Johnson and Byrne dashed through the opening in the ship from which they had entered and were sent careening into space after jumping through the airlock, with Byrne landing perfectly in the Discount's hold and Johnson managing to tumble in after him. The explosions had caused the alien ship to drift further away from their own freighter, but bits and pieces of its indigo hull still fell into the gaping hole in the side of the human spacecraft. They were both panting heavily, with Johnson still nursing his wounded shoulder, as they looked towards the three alien bodies that were sprawled throughout the hold.

A few minutes later, the Walk of Shame docked with the Bulk Discount. Jilan al-Cygni was checking the pins that coiled her hair into a neat bun when the door opened to present ORION soldiers Byrne and Johnson walking towards her. "So, that ship looked pretty weird-" she started, but Byrne cut her off.

"There's still one left for you," he said coldly. It was then that al-Cygni realized that both men had dead bodies draped over their shoulders, which dripped globules of purplish blood. The woman looked in the hold where one body of what was no doubt an alien still lay, with a half dozen entry wounds in its chest.

"Of course," she muttered.

****January 7, 2525****

****Utgard, Harvest****

"Did you see how they communicated?" Governor Thune asked Johnson as

Corpsman Healy finished applying gauze to his injured shoulder.

"No sir, but they should've had plenty of time to send a distress signal or something like that." The three men were in a hospital room in the Utgard Memorial Hospital. Healy had been assigned to the hospital specifically in case Johnson and/or Byrne came back with injuries. He and Ponder, along with the Governor and his Attorney General Rol Pedersen, were the only people who weren't in space earlier that day who knew that first contact had been made with an alien race. The bodies of three of the aliens, along with their weaponry, were being kept in a truck outside the hospital that was carefully watched by Ponder and Pedersen. The Governor planned to break the news to the general public but, until more information could be gained, it was being kept a secret. "Sir, what do you plan to do with the bodies and equipment of the aliens?" Johnson inquired. Jilan al-Cygni, who was also in the room leaning against the wall, focused her attention on the Governor.

"Lieutenant Commander al-Cygni suggested studying them here, in the hospital. After hours, of course. I hope you realize the public would freak out if they realized that we'd discovered alien life," Thune said as he stroked his red beard.

"Yes, sir," Johnson meekly replied. He locked eyes with al-Cygni, who offered a quaint 'whatcha-gonna-do' smile. "Anything else you want to know?"

Thune walked a few paces closer to the door. "Between you and Staff Sergeant Byrne, I think I've got everything covered—wait, one last question: were they tougher than Insurrectionists?"

"Err—well, they certainly demonstrated more military-like behavior! I shot one in the neck and it didn't die, but that could be because of the armor it was wearing."

The governor nodded. "Hopefully that's the case," he grumbled as he walked out of the room, quickly closing the door behind him.

There was a tense moment of silence before Healy said, "So! Aliens, huh? Pretty badass, Johnson!"

"Shut up, corpsman," al-Cygni said in an angry tone. Healy immediately did so, both him and Johnson staring oddly at the woman as she paced the length of the hospital room. "Governor Thune is afraid the people will become angry if the UNSC intervenes. He wasn't happy when the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps ordered a militia to be trained here, and lobbied for another colony to be chosen. As you can tell, it didn't happen. I'm going to gather a small team of local DCS officials—a handful of them know ONI personnel besides myself—and send them to Reach in an effort to get a battlegroup here as soon as possible."

"You think the aliens will pose that much of a threat, ma'am?" Johnson asked as Healy looked on.

"I'm sure of it." With that, the woman walked out the door of the room and down the hallway.

****January 30, 2525****

****Near the Epsilon Indi system****

Dadab sunk into the chair in front of the console and stared at it, checking for any sign of a Covenant ship that might be in the vicinity. There was little else to do besides wander about the small escape pod. Lighter Than Some floated dismally near the entrance hatch, making sad noises. The Unggoy took a small tube full of water and began sucking it before quickly putting his mask back on. It was one of the last stores of water he had left, and his three-week supply of food had run out a few hours ago. He could barely breathe without his mask on, even, as his methane levels were dangerously low. Dadab crossed his arms and laid his head on the console. '_We're going to die_', he thought. Lighter Than Some bowed its head and shook it sadly.

Suddenly, a _ping _was heard, and Dadab removed himself from the console. He stared at it with glee: a large Covenant ship was headed towards his location! "Castaway vessel, this is the _Rapid Conversion_", a gruff voice said. The volume on the console was very low so the pod could conserve power-even the lights had been turned off-so Dadab fumbled for the dial to turn it up as the Huragok floated closer. "Respond if you are able."

Dadab nor Lighter Than Some could see the ship because the pod didn't have windows, but the scanning display on the console showed that it was very close and headed rapidly towards them. "We live, _Rapid Conversion_!" the Unggoy squeaked. "But our situation is dire!"

There was more grumbling heard from the console as the cruiser steadily drew closer. "Remain calm, you will soon be brought aboard," the operator said. The comm channel closed, and Dadab shrieked in excitement!

"Finally, we'll be _rescued_!" he said to Lighter Than Some, who watched him curiously. After a short amount of time, the two felt the pod rising-sucked up by the cruiser's powerful gravity lift. The pod floated into the ship's hanger bay, and forcibly opened by a large hulking brute.

The Jiralhanae, as a species, were ferocious. The one that greeted Dadab and Lighter Than Some was no exception. He stood just a hair shy of nine feet tall and was wearing maroon armor and a helmet that covered his mouth and had 'V'-shaped wings around the ears. With muscular grey skin and darker grey furforming an unkempt beard around his neck, the Unggoy could tell this Jiralhanae was slightly less than middle-aged; perhaps not as headstrong as younger ones, but just as likely to rip his head off if he angered him. "Are you Deacon Dadab of the _Minor Transgression_?" the Jiralhanae asked. Dadab stepped out of the escape pod and nodded, too afraid to speak. "I am Captain Tartarus," the larger alien said. Dadab looked around awkwardly, as if the name was supposed to have some kind of impact. A few Jiralhanae nearby did look at Tartarus with reverence, though. There was also a large batch of Yanme'e: green insectoid creatures with arms, legs and wings, along with intimidating yellow eyes. They perched on one of the two troop-depositing bays of a Spirit dropship and stared intently at the Unggoy and his Huragok counterpart as the latter exited the pod.

"Captain? How many crew members are on your ship, then?"

"Not _my _ship, Unggoy. It is commanded-"

"Tartarus! Where are these drifters?" came a loud, gruff voice. Tartarus winced.

"They are here, Chieftain Maccabeus," he said, pointing to the duo. After that, he took off his maroon helmet, revealing a dark grey Mohawk that frankly took Dadab by surprise. He then focused on Chieftain Maccabeus, who was just as tall as Tartarus, but even more muscular and dangerous-looking. Wearing golden armor, his beard was larger than Tartarus' and was braided, but was white instead of grey. He only had a small patch of hair at the back of his head.

"I see, nephew," Maccabeus said, pushing past Tartarus and looming over Dadab. "Well, Deacon? Your request for assistance indicated something about Forerunner glyphs?"

The Unggoy nodded and gulped. "Yes, Chieftain. But we don't have any." He watched Maccabeus' lip curl into a snarl and fists clench. "I know where to retrieve them though!" he said, backing up a few steps. This alleviated the Chieftain's anger.

"Where?" Maccabeus demanded. At this point, the Jiralhanae in the bridge walked closer to check out what their Chieftain was yelling about.

"A planet!" Dadab said. "I can input its position if you take me to your bridge."

"Fine," Maccabeus said. "Tartarus, escort these two to the bridge. I'm going to finish my meal with the crew." He walked a few paces before his nephew called out.

"Meal, uncle? Why was I not informed of a feast?" he inquired.

"Because you have a _job _to do!" Maccabeus snapped, turning around. "All of you do!" he said to the Jiralhanae in the bridge. With that, he stormed off.

"I will kill him one day!" Tartarus grumbled under his breath. "Come! Follow me to the bridge!" he ordered to Lighter Than Some and Dadab. He began walking towards a purple door that opened up automatically to a corridor, and the Unggoy scampered after him, the Huragok floating not far behind.

When they reached the bridge, a few Unggoy and Jiralhanae looked at the trio. There was one Yanme'e on the bridge as well, tinkering with one of the artificial lights on the ceiling. "Grattius, open the holomap!" Tartarus commanded. One Jiralhanae with dark brown fur nodded, and, after a few clicks of buttons, a map appeared in a circular depression in the floor. It showed the positions of known stars and exoplanets, and the cruiser near one end. Most of the map showed nothing but darkness: space unexplored by the Covenant.

"We were in subspace for twenty days, and must have drifted a few since then!" Dadab went to the map and began musing over where the mysterious planet with all the glyphs might be. He noticed one small planetoid with a dot on it. "What's this? Zoom in!" The Jiralhanae

did so. "That's the planetoid where we came into contact with that first ship! I recognize the giant crater!" Dadab pumped his fist in excitement and turned to Tartarus. "I know where the relics are!"

"Sir?" a Jiralhanae by the name of Denus asked Maccabeus as the latter strolled down the hallway, his lips blood-stained from the meat he had recently eaten. Denus jogged to catch up with his leader. "Chieftain!" That got Maccabeus' attention. "Chieftain! We've located the planet the Unggoy Deacon reported in his message."

"Interesting. Plot a course there," the larger Jiralhanae ordered. "Once we arrive and reclaim the relics, we will notify the Vice Minister of Tranquility." Both Jiralhanae knew that the Vice Minister, a San 'Shyuum, was the one who had helped Maccabeus acquire the _Conversion _from a Sangheili fleet. For that, the Chieftain was grateful.

"The Deacon said that creatures from the world destroyed his ship."

"An alien species!" Maccabeus said. "We will convert them, or they will die." Soon, he was on the bridge of his ship. "Set a course for this world the Unggoy speaks of," he commanded. Tartarus stood behind his uncle, arms crossed and gaze steady. A Jiralhanae with tan fur nodded and punched in some coordinates. Another one pushed a button which activated the ship's subspace capabilities. A large purplish-black rift opened up a kilometer in front of the cruiser: perfectly circular and infinitely long. The _Rapid Conversion _headed towards to rift until it was engulfed by it. It would exit a few days later, and begin a war that would nearly doom an entire species to extinction.

End
file.